halcyon days
by jaylene

Summary

Sakura sees dead people. Well, two dead people to be exact. Everything changes. Sakura-centric. Indra/Sakura/Ashura.

Notes

apparently, I am just really inspired during the most stressful time of the school semester. huzzah. hope you enjoy.

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by My best friends by Stonemedusa
Sakura sees dead people. Well, two dead people to be exact.

From the very young age of five, Sakura knows there is something off about the Uchiha and the Uzumaki in her class. One is greatly adored based on his bloodline and the other is reviled for a secret the adults refuse to speak of in polite company. They have only one thing in common.

Full-grown spirits follow them around.

The first time Ino points out Sasuke with a shy smile, Sakura is beyond surprised. Thankfully, her quiet demeanor keeps her from mentioning anything as she cautiously observes the man hovering behind the boy of Ino’s dreams. He has long dark hair and fierce red eyes. He looks like one of the Uchiha. He isn’t doing anything. He just stands there, looking completely bored, as if the squabbles of children were beneath him. As far as she could tell, no one can see him except her.

*That’s interesting*, Inner Sakura comments blithely.

It scares her, especially since she knows that most people do not see things others couldn’t or have voices in their heads. Sakura fears that she was crazy.

She avoids Sasuke after that.

Naruto she bumps into during one of his pranks. He flinches away, expecting to be hit or berated but Sakura is more interested in the figure behind him. He is tall and fit with cropped dark hair. He isn’t really paying attention to his surroundings which made her examination easier. He looks nicer than Sasuke’s spirit but it frightens Sakura all the more.

She is seeing people; people who aren’t actually there.

Thankfully, Naruto doesn’t have the chance to ask her what she is staring at as Iruka-sensei grabs him by the scruff of his neck and drags him to the Hokage’s office.

She waves Naruto a tentative goodbye, resolving to stay away from both boys for the sake of her sanity.

Sakura holds to that decision, even with Naruto throwing her tentative looks that beg for friendship. She mentally apologizes but she doesn’t want to be near the spirit. Her resolve has yet to waver and she even chooses a seat at the very back of the classroom to keep from drawing attention to herself. Shikamaru sits by her on one side and Ino on the other.

Sakura’s mind drifts as Mizuki-sensei covers information she’d already read. She has a lot of time on her hands when Ino is helping her mom at the flower shop. The library is her favorite place in Konoha.

She catches sight of movement in her peripherals and automatically tenses. Ino throws her a questioning look that Sakura just shakes off.

One of the spirits is moving.
Sakura watches with trepidation as Naruto’s spirit moves toward Sasuke’s. She didn’t even realize they could move.

She avidly spies on the spirits, watching as Naruto’s spirit pleads with the other. His expression is sad and desperate. She has never seen anyone look quite like that. Sakura knows that there is a story there. Sasuke’s spirit is dismissive, ignoring the pleas of Naruto’s. Sakura realizes with a jolt that she cannot hear them.

Sakura decides that it is long past time to visit the library.

She needs to research.

She wears her hair in a braid that slithers down her spine.

Sakura learns from one of her ancient books (The Kuniochi Way to be precise; a handbook written for and by kuniochi during the Warring Era) that things can be beautiful and twice as deadly.

Sakura wraps her hair in a spiked thong and places short senbon intermittently through her braid. Anyone who tries to grab her hair is in for a nasty surprise.

It is when she is buying these hair accessories that she meets Tenten.

It goes a little like this:

Sakura hesitates outside the well-established shinobi shop. She has never really explored this district and she is unsure of the procedure.

“Hi!” a voice greets.

Sakura looks up into kind brown eyes set in a tanned face. “Hi,” she says in return, a bit shyly.

The girl assesses her before saying, “First time here right?”

Sakura nods abashedly, starting when she throws an arm over her shoulder.

“No need to be shy! I’m Tenten and I’m this store’s number one customer!” the dark haired girl declares, leading Sakura into the store.

Sakura does not reply, flabbergasted by the amount of stuff in the store. She had no idea there are this many ways of killing a person.

Tenten nudges her and Sakura flushes. “I’m Sakura,” she replies belatedly.

“What are you shopping for?” she asks, waving enthusiastically at the bored chunin cashier.

“I’m looking for hair ties,” Sakura explains. She gestures to her long pink hair. “I read that kuniochi in wartimes would weave spikes and other weapons into their hair. If an enemy ever grabbed it…” Sakura trails off.

Tenten gives her an excited look. “That’s amazing! I had no idea. Would you mind if I buy some too?”

Sakura leaves that shop with newfound confidence, hair ties, and friend.
The next time she is in class Mizuki-sensei gives her an odd look. He approaches her while she is sparring and scans her thoroughly. Sakura stands still, waiting for judgment. Finally, his eyes crinkle upward in a smile and he cautiously pats her head.

“I see you’ve been reading some more,” he states proudly.

Sakura shrugs with a slight smile.

“Just, be careful. Remember that these are your classmates,” he tells her. “You don’t want to hurt them.”

Sakura nods. She knows this all too well. One day, when they are no longer in the play yard sparring but actually out fighting and dying, she will add poison to her hair accessories, just like the kunoichi of old.

Those who underestimate her and grab her hair will be bitten in return.

_Little baby badass, Inner crows._

Sakura continues to read books on the founders and those who come before them. She thinks these spirits are ancient, especially with their style of clothing. They are probably from a time before the shinobi villages. A time of the Sage of Six Paths.

Unfortunately, there are not many books on the Sage’s time, aside from those that detail his legendary feats. Sakura decides to go to the wisest man she knows: the “God of Shinobi.”

Sarutobi Hiruzen.

“Sakura-chan,” he says in surprise as the eight-year-old girl walks into his office. The Hokage has made it a point to know all of the Academy students by name as they will inherit the Will of Fire. The children carry the future of Konoha and they need to be made to feel important. “What can I do for you?”

Sakura steps into the room, glancing at his Anbu guards quickly. She sits down in front of his desk and smiles nervously. “Hokage-sama, I was wondering if I might borrow some books from you. I tried to find them in the library but there are not many.”

Sarutobi raises an eyebrow out of curiosity. “What books, Sakura-chan?”

“Books on the time of the Sage of Six Paths,” she replies.

Sarutobi looks mystified but he chuckles all the same. “Mizuki-sensei has reported that you are a voracious reader and this further proves it.” He nods to her. “I have some books you can borrow. Weasel; take her to the library in the Hokage House. She’ll find what she needs there.”

One of the Anbu nods before holding a hand out to Sakura.

She takes it tentatively, smiling at the Hokage. “Thank you Hokage-sama,” she says quietly before leaving with the Anbu.

Sarutobi watches her go thoughtfully, smoking his pipe. “The Will of Fire is strong in this generation,” he finally decides. “I’ll be interested to see where they go from here.”
Sakura feels awkward and gangly beside Weasel who embodies grace. She can feel him staring at her so she finally says, “Yes?”

“Why are you interested in the Sage of Six Paths?” he asks softly.

Sakura recognizes the voice. She hears it every time Sasuke’s brother comes to pick him up. Uchiha Itachi: scion and heir of the Uchiha clan. She is still astonished that he was promoted so rapidly but Sakura gets the feeling that the Uchiha exerted their influence on that decision. Hokage-sama does not seem the sort to enjoy child soldiers.

She shrugs in reply. “Who wouldn’t be interested in the man that created our skills?”

She knows that Weasel does not really buy her response but he says nothing. From what she knows of Itachi, he does not know how to interact with people on a social level outside of Sasuke. It is sad, she thinks, that he is so accomplished yet has so little of what really matters. Ino and Tenten are Sakura’s stalwart companions and she cannot imagine life without them.

“I want to know more about the wars he stopped,” Sakura elucidates.

“You wear weapons in your hair,” he points out randomly.

Sakura nods. “Kuniochi who wore their hair long during the Warring Era often wrapped weapons in it. If anyone tried to pull them over by their hair…” she trails off.

“That is smart. I am surprised that the trend died out.”

Sakura snorted. “I’m surprised that so few people read about the wars we’ve fought in.” She eyes his silky dark hair speculatively. “You could do it too. Shinobi with long hair often did the same. Besides, my friends have started to wear their hair this way. Maybe it’ll catch on.”

Weasel makes a humming noise. “We’re here,” he says. He makes no move to follow her into the building, aside from giving the guards a slip from the Hokage.

She turns to him and bows. “Thank you for escorting me, Weasel-san.”

He nods in turn, hesitating. “…let me know what you find.” He slips his mask off. “I am Uchiha Itachi.” He watches her shrewdly. “I think you already knew that though.”

Sakura smiles guilelessly.

Ōtsutsuki Indra and Ashura.

The sons of the Sage of Six Paths.

Sakura watches the spirits’ interactions through new eyes. Everyone has heard the tragic story of the Ōtsutsuki brothers who turned on one another after their father’s death. It isn’t until she sees an etching of their battle in one of the Hokage’s books that she realizes just who these spirits are.

Sakura cannot help but fear for Naruto and Sasuke’s fates. There is a reason that these ancient spirits, these ghosts, are following them around and their story is not a happy one.

Ashura, Naruto’s ghost, seems repentant of his actions and continuously seeks his brother’s love. Sasuke’s spirit, Indra, is too proud to listen. Sakura likes to watch them from her place in the back
of the classroom as she, Ino, and Shikamaru doodle and write to each other in a cipher of their own creation. Sakura glances at the senbon in Ino’s hair with a mild grin.

*Poison training later?* Sakura scrawls across the sheet of paper.

Ino glances down and smiles. **Yeah. Mum is on a mission. Can Tenten come?**

*No. She has some sort of additional assignment this afternoon.*

Sakura spends the rest of the class drawing cartoonish depictions of Indra and Ashura. Ino, knowing Sakura’s obsession with their story, just giggles.

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Ino’s mom finds them throwing up in the bathroom. Aiko is just returned from an exhausting solo B-ranked mission and wants nothing more than to sleep.

“Girls, what’s going on?” she asks with concern, rubbing a hand down each of their backs.

“Rhododendron,” Ino gasps before retching into the toilet again.

Aiko is torn between pride and anger. “You girls are trying to build up immunity to poisons? Alone?”

Sakura nods with exhaustion. “Just the natural ones. We aren’t going to start on the artificial until after we’re promoted.”

Natural poisons are dangerous by themselves but those created from the minds of the depraved are much, much worse.

“Girls,” Aiko begins. “What brought this on?”

“During the Second Great Shinobi War, poison was an essential component to the warfare,” Sakura recites. “Besides, the best ninja of Suna are poison wielders.”

“What she said,” Ino says. “We also have the best access of everyone in Konoha to these poisons. Why wouldn’t we take advantage?”

Aiko sighs, smiling ruefully. She wonders if her parents had to deal with her enthusiasm for the ninja way. “Next time, let me know ahead of time. I can help you prepare. You also need to make sure you have an antidote on hand, just in case something goes awry.”

“Do you have an antidote?” Sakura asks hopefully.

“Yes,” Aiko replies.

“May we have it?” Ino inquires after a long pause.

“No, you may not,” Aiko says firmly. “As punishment for your reckless behavior, you’re going to wait this out.” She pats their backs as she leaves. “Have fun girls.”

They moan pitifully.
“Aburame-san,” Sakura greets.

Shino regards her cautiously behind his sunglasses. While Sakura is not physically the strongest in their class, she is incredibly intelligent and unforgivingly dangerous in spars. Shino respects the fact that she is so dedicated to her craft but he is wise to be wary.

“Haruno-san,” he says in turn, tilting his head slightly.

“Would you accompany me after class today?” Sakura asks.

Shino blinks. “You want to walk with me home from school. Why? Obviously you want some information.”

Sakura does not flinch at his peculiar manner of speech which is more than he can say about most of his classmates. “You are not wrong.”

They watch each other in silence before Shino nods in acquiesce.

Sakura grins at him and runs off to rejoin Ino, Shikamaru, and Choji; her constant companions these days.

Shino spends the rest of the class warily watching her, catching the way she stares pointedly at something beyond Sasuke and Naruto’s shoulders. There is nothing there, but Shino has enough quirks of his own to be unfazed by her peculiarities. He amuses himself with watching her for the rest of class until Iruka signals the end of the day.

Shino waits as Sakura drags Shikamaru behind her, with Ino and Choji trailing behind.

“I didn’t realize there would be an audience,” Shino comments, slightly flustered.

Sakura shrugs, laughing a little. “They thought my question was interesting.”

“And what exactly is that question?” he responds.

The group begins to file out the door. “So, Ino and I were wondering a bit about the way that your bugs break down poison. I know that the Aburame are the official poison specialists of the village. I was also wondering how they drain chakra of enemies. Do they facilitate a transfer of enemy chakra to your own?”

Shino blinked rapidly, processing this information. “A lot of what you ask is secret; known only to the Aburame clan.”

Sakura and Ino both deflate in disappointment.

“Damn,” Ino mutters. “I thought we were going to get an easier way of poison immunity.”

By the unsurprised looks on Choji and Shikamaru’s faces, Shino assumes this is knowledge well known in their friend circle. “You are building up poison immunities?”

Sakura and Ino glance at each other and have a silent conversation before nodding. “Ino’s mom and dad run the florist shop here when they aren’t on missions. We have easy access,” Sakura explains blithely. “Besides, Yamanaka-san supports our endeavors.”

Shino nods and hesitates before speaking, “I will speak with the elders about it. There may be some general information I can give you.”
The girls and Choji grin, though Shikamaru shakes his head in exasperation. “Way to encourage their craziness,” he grumbles but subsists with a well-placed elbow on Choji’s part.

“Thanks so much Aburame-san!” Ino enthuses. “Maybe we can train sometime, even if this whole thing doesn’t pan out.”

Shino looks at the group of friends and feels something akin to envy in his chest. He wants something like what they have. He smiles slightly. “That sounds great Yamanaka-san.”

Sakura glances down at her headband, pride radiating in her chest. She is a genin of Konoha now. She is technically an adult. Sakura ties the headband around her throat, knowing that the area is incredibly vulnerable. The placement may deflect small projectiles.

Ino runs over to her, throwing her arms around her. “Can you believe we graduated? This is awesome! Tenten said she can meet us at that seafood place we went to that one time for dinner tonight. You know the place? Her team is training right now though.”

Sakura nods, staring over at Sasuke and Itachi. Itachi is poking his brother’s forehead as the boy pouts. Indra looks reluctantly amused. Naruto is not celebrating. He did not pass.

Sakura feels bad for him, truly she does, but she also knows that the boy doesn’t study. The tests they took are laughable at best and are not true preparations for being a ninja. Ino and Shikamaru have noticed as well. Sakura thinks that Shino knows too.

She glances around their classroom one last time; the place she has spent the last six years of her life. She will miss it, if only for her friends’ constant company. They will be separated tomorrow.

Mizuki-sensei congratulates her sincerely before moving off to other genin. Sakura notices that Hyuuga-san is all alone, no family present to celebrate with her.

Sakura nudges Ino, breaking her out of an argument with Shikamaru. She looks to Hinata and nods. The duo approaches the timid girl, frowning when she flinches away. Sakura cannot help but wonder if there is abuse and neglect in the Hyuuga compound.

“Hyuuga-san,” Sakura greets. “Would you like to join us tonight? A couple of us are grabbing dinner at the local seafood place.”

Hinata flushes, starting to shake her head.

“Seriously, Hinata,” Ino says. “We’d love to have you join us. If I have to listen to Sakura go on about different wars again, I might scream.”

Hinata glances between the two of them, flush dark against her face. “I-I would be honored to accompany you, Haruno-san, Yamanaka-san.”

“Call me Sakura,” Sakura says. “You can call her Ino. We aren’t too big on formality.”

Hinata flashes them a tentative smile. “P-please call me Hinata then.”

The trio grins at one another, unaware of the long-lasting bond they have just forged.
Sakura settles into her seat, sated after a long night of good food and better friends. Tenten and Hinata hit it off, surprisingly enough, griping about the Hyuuga on Tenten’s team. Iruka-sensei is about to announce the teams.

Sakura is beyond surprised to see Naruto stride into the room, headband shining on his forehead. He and Sasuke begin arguing about something as per usual. Both spirits look incredibly resigned though Ashura seems happy to be beside his older brother.

Ino laughs, pulling up a chair next to Sakura. “Are they at it again?” she asks. Ino has long outgrown her crush on the Uchiha boy.

“As always,” Sakura replies, waving at Hinata who joins them.

Shikamaru snorts. “I pity anyone who ends up on a team with one of them.”

“Why is that?” Ino inquires.

“Neither knows the meaning of teamwork.”

Iruka-sensei clears his throat and begins listing off teams. “Team Seven will consist of Uchiha Sasuke, Haruno Sakura, and Uzumaki Naruto,” he reads.

Sakura glances at her friends who are leveling her with looks of sympathy and then to her teammates and the ghosts behind them.

It figures that Sakura would be placed on this team.

Sakura strides up to her teammates, long braid trailing behind her. She smiles as Naruto brightens considerably.

“Sakura-chan!” he exclaims, grabbing her hand. He is starved for contact and Sakura has never shied away from him though she has never been a friend to him. “Isn’t it great that we are on the same team?”

Sasuke smiles slightly at her. He is glad to have her on his team. She’s sensible and intelligent. “You’re much better the idiot here, that’s for sure.”

Sakura links hands with Sasuke as well.

“It is nice to meet you as a team,” she greets, all the while looking up into the eyes of their shadows. “Please take care of me as I take care of you.”

The figures exchange astonished looks before waving to her, Ashura enthusiastically and Indra very slightly.

Sakura has the sinking suspicion that her genin days are going to be...eventful.
heads up, I play hard and loose with canon timelines. I try to keep the events in a linear order but the span of time that has passed will probably be different than canon. this is perhaps the closest thing to my ideal version of Kishimoto’s story as my writing will get. I tend to skim over or merely reference major parts of actual canon (i.e. bell test) to leave room for my interpretation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kakashi-sensei is, in a word, eccentric.

He preaches ideals of teamwork and unity that Sakura regards highly but his actual teaching skills are little more than lackluster. He generally expects them to fend for themselves in the time spent before his arrival after which they perform menial tasks for the village. Sakura does not waste the opportunity.

She trains.

Sakura is more than appalled at the standard of Naruto’s taijutsu. While no expert herself by any means, Sakura easily recognizes his slipshod work for what it is.

Neglect.

There is some dark secret enshrouding the boy, though it has nothing to do with the dark shadow ever present at his back. The adults in the village waver between ignoring his existence and making him wish he never existed. Sakura feels guilt for being one of the former and resolves to be a friend to Naruto.

She does her best to correct his stances and maximize his energy, but she is only one girl who does not have much experience in the area of taijutsu. Sasuke is not much help either; though he is skilled in taijutsu, he has yet to fully comprehend the meaning of being a team.

Thankfully, she does receive assistance.

Ashura, incredibly curious about this one precocious child who can see him, is a well of information. Sakura cannot hear the words he speaks; to both of their frustrations, but his actions resonate powerfully. He demonstrates the moves for her multiple times. Naruto and Sasuke do not catch the way her eyes are focused on nothing during their early morning meditations (something Sakura demanded as team bonding). Indra, much like Sasuke, remains distant though Sakura has caught glimpses of amusement in his eyes as he observes the team’s antics.

When she performs the motions for Naruto to watch, Ashura even hovers over her, incorporeal hands guiding her steps.

With his gentle guidance, she and Naruto improve in leaps and bounds.

Sakura notices the way Sasuke regards some of her katas with suspicion and envy but she waves it off as the dusty old tomes that she is reading. One day she notices the physical divide between
herself, Sasuke, and Naruto, so she decides to offer the proverbial olive branch.

“Sasuke!” she calls playfully because as much as he tries to hide behind the Uchiha veneer and pride she can read him like a book. “Bet I can do this one better than you!”

His eyes narrow competitively and Sakura knows that she has him.

“Yes!” Naruto exclaims, catching on. While he failed many of the exams they took, Sakura knows he is much smarter than he appears. The disgust and disinterest on the part of the Academy instructors in taking the time to teach this boy has taken its toll. She reminds herself to get him some books on basic shinobi knowledge from the library. She is sure he will like them. “I can definitely get this one down faster than you, teme!”

Sakura catches sight of Ashura laughing hysterically as Indra puts a palm on his face, undoubtedly bemoaning the state of ninja youth.

Sakura smiles to herself, knowing that they have just created a new morning ritual.

“This is so much better than meditating!” Naruto cheers as he carefully maps out his motions.

She is not wrong.

Sakura knows that Kakashi knows of Team Seven’s impromptu trainings. She is just waiting for him to make the first move and show that he is not disinterested in his team. Surprisingly, training outside of D-ranked missions does not first come from him.

It comes from Itachi.

It happens something like this:

Sasuke has, ever since being drawn into the morning kata training, quickly warmed up to Sakura and Naruto. She has started to bring them to dinners with her Academy friends and close bonds have been cemented. He is more open with them than he has ever been with any non-Uchiha.

When he begins to grumble about his mother wanting to meet his team, Sakura shrugs and asks, “Why not?”

Sasuke’s eyes go wide. “W-what?” he sputters.

Naruto nods. “Your mom sounds nice, teme. Much better than you at least.”

Before they can devolve into further bickering, Sakura interrupts, “When would your mother like us to come around?”

Sasuke slouches. “She’d probably be happy to have you there tonight.”

“Oh my cute genin students, making all sorts of grown up plans!” Kakashi exclaims, familiar orange book in hand. “Shijimi-hime’s cat has run away again.” They groan collectively. “Get to it!”

Hours later, they are covered in scratches and feeling defeated. Sakura in particular is upset, but that is mainly because she is subjected to Ashura’s laughter and Indra’s condescending smirks. The three make their way to the Uchiha district.
Both Sakura and Naruto are in awe of its splendor. Sakura has only ever been to the Yamanaka, Nara, and Akimichi compounds which are much more humble in stature. Neither has visited a clan compound quite like this. Sasuke is unaffected by their surroundings, though he waves happily at his numerous family members.

He turns into one of the side streets, leading them away from the bustle of the main street. The house he brings them to is on a lake with a dock overlooking the beautiful scene. Sakura forgets herself for a moment, running forward in excitement.

“This is so cool!” she exclaims, dropping to her chest and staring down into the lake.

Naruto joins her a bit more hesitantly. “What are we doing?” he asks.

“Looking for fish…and mermaids,” Sakura says mischievously.

“…Idiots,” Sasuke groans, but they coerce him to join them.

Someone, Sakura will never own up to it, starts splashing the others. Chaos ensues.

By the time they enter the house, they are soaked to the bone and grinning wildly.

“Oka-san!” Sasuke calls.

“In the kitchen!” a melodic voice replies.

The children toe off their shoes and go into the kitchen. Reading his lips, Sakura knows that Ashura is berating her for wandering around soaked in water as Indra shakes his head. She ignores them and focuses on Sasuke’s mother.

She is a tall, willowy brunette with the fine features characteristic of the Uchiha. Her eyes are a warm, open grey and she greets the children enthusiastically. “Sasuke-chan, you didn’t tell me you were bringing friends!” Sasuke flushes and mumbles something in return. “You must be Sakura-chan and Naruto-chan! It is wonderful to meet you. Please call me Mikoto.”

“Thank you for your hospitality, Mikoto-san,” Sakura says politely, nudging Naruto into doing the same. He is not yet used to visiting the homes of others.

“It is no trouble at all,” she declares. “Sasuke-chan, take your teammates to your room to change into dry clothes.”

After some mock fights and tumbling in Sasuke’s room, the children find themselves seated at the dinner table, with the uchiwa fan emblazoned upon the back.

Mikoto smiles at their adorable antics as they bicker and argue and generally act like themselves. Sasuke and Naruto bring out the childish side of Sakura, but she does not begrudge them it.

“Where’s Itachi-nii?” Sasuke asks, between taking large bites out of a plain tomato. Sakura exchanges disgusted looks with Naruto though she notes that Indra eyes the tomato with a wistfulness that hurts her heart.

“What’s your favorite thing to make?” Mikoto replies. “He should be back any—“

“I’m home,” a soft, weary voice states.
“Itachi-nii!” Sasuke exclaims, forgetting his upbringing as he flings himself at his brother. Itachi pats him on the back with fondness. “Welcome home.”

Itachi surveys the visitors, nodding slightly to Sakura. They have had a few encounters since the Hokage’s library and are cordial to one another. “It is nice to see you again, Haruno-san. Nice to meet you Uzumaki-san,” he greets before taking a seat.

“You know each other?” Sasuke demands, sounding betrayed.

Sakura shrugs. “We met when he had to take me to the Hokage’s library.” She scratched a cheek in slight embarrassment. “I like reading the books from the Warring Eras.”

Mikoto is eyeing them all fondly. “How is training going?” she asks, wanting to dissuade Sasuke from picking a fight with his teammate for his brother.

The teammates take one look at each other before laughing. “Kakashi-sensei takes a very… ‘hands off’ approach,” Sakura said diplomatically.

“That’s an understatement,” Sasuke mutters, before yelping as Sakura jabs him in a ticklish spot.

“Hatake-san is habitually late,” Itachi laments. “What do you do when he isn’t there?”

“We meditate because Sakura makes us. Then we practice katas!” Naruto exclaims, still eating quickly. Sakura cannot help but worry that he is not getting the food he needs at home. “Sakura sometimes leads that and sometimes Sasuke-te…Sasuke does.”

Itachi eyes them all thoughtfully, though he is most interested in Sakura’s contribution. “What katas?”

“The ones in the books I read,” Sakura returns, picking up her bowl of rice. “There are usually illustrations that demonstrate the motions.” She is not completely lying. She does see demonstrations, just not in the books she reads.

“And do you spar with one another?” Itachi probes.

Sasuke shakes his head. Since the disaster of their initiation, Kakashi-sensei has not made them spar.

Itachi hums, looking to his mother who nods. “When I am in the village, I can lead you in some sparring exercises. Oka-san is an accomplished, though retired, jonin. Perhaps she will be willing to train with you as well.”

“I would be honored,” Mikoto states.

Sakura reads of a hand signing language used by shinobi during the Warring Eras. She begins to study this language intensively, drawing on the memory powers of Inner Sakura as well to memorize the words. Shinobi use simple hand symbols these days, generally for espionage and ambushes, not the complex, sprawling language of old. She fits this between lessons with Itachi (on the rare occasion) and lessons with Mikoto (much more often).

Kakashi has begun to take an interest in their progress and even begins to teach them new ways to manipulate their chakra.
Tree walking.

It is something that is so every day to Konoha nin yet they were not taught in the Academy. Sakura wonders how old Indra and Ashura were when they learned.

Without thinking, she signs to them. Thankfully, Kakashi-sensei is teasing Naruto and his back is facing her.

Indra and Ashura’s reactions are...amusing. Ashura begins to prance around her giddily, signing at a speed much too fast for her to read. Indra’s mouth is hanging open; the most surprised she’s ever seen him. They can experience every part of the physical world but touch; they know that this language is no longer used or even taught.

Slowly, Indra signs, “How did you learn?”

“Reading,” she replies cheekily in sign. “You should try it sometime.”

He scowls slightly but his eyes are happy. With a start, Sakura realizes this is the first time Indra has actually interacted with her.

“What are you staring at Sakura?” Kakashi asks, interrupting her breakthrough with the surly spirit.

Sakura jumps, turning to meet her curious teacher’s one-eyed gaze. For a moment, she wishes that he stayed inattentive and resentful to the team Hokage-sama forced upon him (Itachi is kind of a gossip, when given the chance).

“Just daydreaming,” she replies casually. “What were you saying?”

He explains the tree walking process again.

Sakura nods in understanding though she sees the way that Naruto’s eyes glaze over. Before she can explain it to Naruto, she needs to figure it out for herself. Sakura reaches for her chakra, startled when it responds immediately. She adjusts her braid, takes a breath, and runs straight at her chosen tree. To her astonishment, it works instantly. It is an odd feeling, walking horizontally up a tree. She reaches a branch halfway up the tree where she stops, breathless and exhilarated.

Kakashi is watching her intently, surprise clear in his eye. Ashura is celebrating as Indra grudgingly claps. Sakura climbs back down the tree, a little more wary than she is on the way up.

“How did you learn?” Naruto says. “You’re amazing! How’d you do it?”

Sakura smiles and begins to explain, smirking when she catches Sasuke listening in.

As the boys begin their attempts once more, Kakashi regards her with interest.

“This team is full of surprises isn’t it?” he asks.

Sakura shrugs. “All people are.”

He stares at the spikes in her hair. “What inspired the fashion statement?”

“Books on the Warring Era,” Sakura replies. “My long hair can remain practical in the field.”

Kakashi nods. “Were you the one to enlist the Uchiha spar instructors?” From his voice, Sakura cannot tell if he is upset.
Sakura blushes. “They volunteered?” she replies, unsure of the answer he’s looking for.

Kakashi smirks. “I’m going to have to stop going easy on you children; I’ve been way too lenient and kind.” He cracks his knuckles, nodding to her teammates. “Tell the boys we meet at four in the morning tomorrow.”

“For what?” Sakura demands, flabbergasted.

“Survival training,” he replies. “I hope none of you are allergic to dogs!” With that, he disappears.

Sakura casts Indra and Ashura a helpless look before flopping to the ground with a groan.

She really needs to learn to be careful what she wished for.

Sakura eventually spars with Shino. It is an ugly, brutal fight that ends in a draw as both are suffering from chakra exhaustion. He has given her some of the more general information of the Aburame clan, such as a basic overview of the poison and chakra breakdown process.

She hasn’t wasted it. Indra has even shared some good ideas on how to utilize the information while Ashura just looks lost.

Sasuke, Hinata, Naruto, and an inquisitive Kiba are there cheering on their respective teammates. By the end of the spar, Kurenai and Kakashi are both present and exchanging befuddled looks.

The spar sparks a tradition that is upheld by the Rookie Nine (as Naruto calls them) long after their genin period.

It is an accident that they stumble into a little like this:

Sakura holds out a hand to Shino, panting hard all the while. She has never been so drained of her chakra in her life.

“That…was a good fight,” she says, still trying to regulate her breathing.

Shino allows her to pull him up, grasping her forearm. “It definitely was. Thank you Haruno-san. We should do this again in the future.”

Before she can respond, they are bombarded by their teammates who ask them all sorts of questions about the fight. Sakura greets Hinata happily and they begin to discuss defensive maneuvers.

“Asshole!” Naruto howls.

Sakura and Hinata turn in surprise to catch sight of Naruto launching himself at Kiba. Ashura is shaking his head in disappointment as Sasuke and Sakura leap into action to stop him. They pull Naruto away just as Hinata and Shino do the same with Kiba, who has his teeth bared.

“Naruto,” Sakura berates. “What has gotten into you?”

Naruto shrugs. “I didn’t like the look on his face.”

Sakura shakes her head before glancing at Kiba thoughtfully. “Naruto, you can’t just attack another Konoha nin.”
“But they could spar,” Kurenai cuts in, looking between the genin.

“Take responsibility Naruto,” Kakashi says, crossing his arms. “Follow through on your actions.” His eye takes on an evil glean. “Do I need to summon Pakkun?”

With a pale face, Naruto agrees to a spar with Kiba and their teams step back to watch.

Kurenai eyes the genin before turning to Kakashi. “This is the most enthused I have seen my students,” she says leadingly.

Kakashi nods in agreement. “They all seem fired up.”

“Perhaps we can start a weekly sparring session?” she inquires. “They can spar as teams, duos, or even solo.”

“It’ll boost comradery!” Sakura butts in. “I can get Team Eight and maybe even Tenten’s team…” she trails off, turning to the other genin as they begin scheming.

Kakashi smirks as he catches Kurenai’s blush. “Here I thought the rumor of you and Asuma had no foundation.”

He finds himself pinned by a murderous red stare. “Hush,” Kurenai states repressively.

Kakashi grins.

Sakura races to the bridge where she meets her teammates daily. Naruto and Sasuke are already there, scuffling about in some sort of brawl. She shakes her head fondly and takes a seat under the shade of a large tree. Indra and Ashura make their way over to her, falling into a sitting position as well.

“How are you?” she signs.

Her teammates no longer question it when she starts using foreign hand signs. She has explained that she is trying to learn the complicated language used by their ancestors. She offers to teach them and smiles wryly as they quickly refuse, uninterested in a dead language. Sakura does teach them a few basic signs that can be used when they must be silent. The hand language in use now is incredibly simple and rudimentary; no one else will recognize the long forgotten language. It is like a personalized Team Seven cipher.

These signs have come in handy in their weekly spars with the other genin.

Indra grunts and Ashura bemoans the events of the night prior. Sakura is much better at understanding the language and grins at Ashura’s embellished story. Indra eventually pushes Ashura away, settling beside Sakura to begin meditation.

Sakura has only recently been informed that meditation is a method of expanding chakra reserves and Indra is all too happy to assist her.

She falls into herself, flashing a smile to Inner as she reaches for her core. Sakura can feel the world around her, the movements of her teammates; the birds in the air. She can even sense Indra and Ashura.

Sakura is lulled into a deeper state by the reassuring thrum of Ashura and Indra’s existence.
“Sakura!” Naruto calls, breaking her from her meditative state.

Her eyes open to see Indra scowling thunderously at the hyperactive boy. Sakura smiles however. “Yeah?” she asks.

“You’ve been meditating for hours!” he whines. “Why didn’t you wait for us?”

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “It’s been thirty minutes,” he informs her with a smirk.

Sakura shrugs. “You were both a little occupied when I got here,” she says, smirking when they blush. “Oh!” she exclaims, pulling a book out of her bag and ignoring the boys’ simultaneous groans. “I learned something really interesting this morning.”

“And what might that be?” Kakashi asks, sauntering up to his trio of genin.

Sasuke glances at his watch. “You’re early,” he remarks warily. Kakashi is never on time unless there is a survival training exercise. “Why?”

“Don’t worry about it kid!” Kakashi exclaims, ruffling his hair and pretending not to hear Sasuke’s squawk of indignation. “As you were saying Sakura?”

“Right.” She flipped through the book to one of the pages she has marked. “It says here that there are ways of finding out our chakra affinities. There’s some sort of…paper test. It’s the easiest way of finding out, though there are others.”

Kakashi nods. “Right you are Sakura. We’ll have to do that some other time.” He pulls out a scroll. “Shijimi-hime’s cat is once again missing. D-ranked mission.”

The genin sigh.

“One of these days, the old man is going to assign us a C-ranked!” Naruto claims with determination. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Sakura exchanges cautious looks with Ashura and Indra.

This wouldn’t end well.

Sakura’s first love is Haku.

It is after the first terrifying, draining battle with Zabuza. Kakashi-sensei has collapsed and her team is barely holding itself together. Sakura is proud of their actions in the fight, their ability to move as a unit, but she cannot help but feel helpless.

She often walks the forests around Tazuna’s abode, trying to escape the oppressive atmosphere of the house. Sasuke and Naruto argue and fight more often than usual and Sakura needs something quiet. The village is small and struggling, there is no one there who can really hurt a ninja even if she is only genin.

It is on one such walk that she encounters Haku.

He is beautiful and dainty in a way that makes Sakura’s heart pound and blood rush to her face. There is something ethereal to this boy that draws Sakura to him.
“Hello,” she greets, surprised to find someone else in the forest. It is in the odd, struggling hours of dawn as weak light breaks through the trees, chasing away shadows.

“Hello,” he replies, gracefully rising from gathering flowers. Sakura notes that they are medicinal in use and wonders. “It is strange to find another roaming at this time.”

Sakura nods weakly. “I’m Sakura.”

“Haku,” he replies, watching her with a keen gaze.

“Would it bother you terribly if I meditate here?” Sakura inquires. “This is the place I have been coming to recently.”

The boy shrugs lithely and returns to his flowers. “Do as you please.”

They remain in companionable silence for hours and as Sakura prepares to leave, he asks, “You are a ninja, correct?”

Sakura’s attire alone screams this fact so she sees no harm in nodding.

“Do you…have something you wish to protect?”

Sakura thinks of Ino and days spent learning the names of flowers both poisonous and beautiful. She thinks of Tenten and hours wiled away discussing great kunoichi of different time periods. She pictures Naruto’s unabashed grin, Sasuke’s shy smile, and Itachi’s soft eyes. Sakura thinks of Kakashi-sensei and his quiet kindness. She especially thinks of Ashura with his unfailing encouragement and Indra with his steadfast strength.

Sakura nods. “I wish to guard my friends’ smiles…” she pauses, thinking of group exercises and ringing laughter. “I cherish our halcyon days.”

Haku regards her with wide eyes. “I see. I think I understand you better, Sakura-san,” he says. He bows to her. “Thank you for sharing a piece of yourself with me. There is a man who I wish to protect, though he never smiles.”

Sakura smiles and grabs him by a hand, ignoring the wild beating of her heart. “Then let us make a promise, Haku-san; we will shield our friends’ smiles and seek to give them happiness to smile about.”

Haku’s answering smile is something Sakura will cherish for years to come.

“It’s the promise of a lifetime,” he pledges.

They seal the promise with the most innocent and chaste of kisses. His lips are dry, his eyelashes brush her cheeks, the kiss itself is a little unwieldy, and Sakura feels complete contentment.

They meet on the battlefield, each trying to hold up their end of the bargain; Sakura, protecting the lives of her teammates, Haku, serving Zabuza’s will. Neither will bend nor yield to the other, though Sakura’s heart is heavy with her duty to Konoha.

She tells Tazuna to hide as she rushes to save Sasuke. Indra and Ashura are shouting at her to stop and grasping at her with ghostly hands, but Sakura does not pay them any heed. She pulls senbon from her pouch and from her braid, never hesitating as she steps into the mirrored zone.
Haku’s territory.

Sakura has a fleeting moment to berate herself for not mastering the art of senbon before she is bombarded by Haku’s attacks. All are nonlethal. Some she prevents.

Others she does not.

Sakura knows that Haku recognizes her, especially with the reluctance in his attacks. She does not plead with him, understanding his mission all too well. After all, she is standing over Sasuke’s prone body, fending him from further attacks.

He wants to make his precious person smile.

One of the senbon strikes the soft flesh behind her knee, buckling the muscle and forcing her to the ground. She looks up at Haku just as an amazing thing happens.

Naruto has entered the fray, back from wherever he has been.

His eyes are red and chakra is surrounding his body. He growls and screams at Haku, breaking a few of his mirrors. Haku, while moved by Naruto’s speech, is ultimately uninterested. He smiles in the most heartbreaking way Sakura has ever seen and says, “I’m sorry.”

Then he is throwing himself in front of Zabuza, protecting him from Kakashi’s attack. Sakura watches as he falls to the ground, her heart falling with him.

When Gatō’s men come, seeking to slaughter and destroy, Sakura is ready. She does not give Zabuza the honor of fighting them off alone. Sakura is mourning too, though in a different way.

She mourns a “what if,” a “could have been.”

It is here that Sakura truly understands that the human body is just so much meat, housing a spirit greater than the body can ever be. She tastes iron and copper as she forces the kunai to cut through skin like wet paper. There is something distant and mechanic about her actions. Sakura knows, realistically, she is in shock.

There is a difference between knowing how to kill a man and knowing how to kill a man.

Still, Sakura believes that she is honoring Haku’s spirit, aiding the man he so adored. She continues to slash and hack away at the vagabonds who have no honor and know not justice.

The townsfolk come too late.

Haku and Zabuza are already dead.

And Sakura is covered in the blood of borrowed enemies and nurses a wounded heart.

She cries at the burial.

Ashura and Indra are relieved because she has been in emotionless shock since the battle of Naruto’s bridge, as the villagers call it. Both believe that it should be called the battle of Sakura’s bridge.

Sakura thinks it should have been Haku’s bridge.
Her teammates are crying too, though Sakura thinks it is for other reasons. She does not mourn Zabuza, though he did recognize Haku’s value in the end. She cries solely for Haku, who was raised as a weapon and died as one.

*Will that be us one day?* Inner asks in a subdued, raw voice. She cared for Haku too and grieves his loss in her own way.

Sakura cannot respond for she doesn’t know. She knows, rationally, that she will one day probably die for Konoha without regrets. In her heart, Sakura has already resolved herself to this fact. Seeing someone else doing the same, dying for his precious person, is too much. Sakura’s precious person is Konoha as a whole and she fears it may damn her one day soon.

She is not completely wrong.

Kakashi allows them to mourn and tells them that there is no shame in honoring a fallen enemy. Sakura has seen him wipe his own tears away and wonders at the story behind it. There is heavy baggage in the words he imparts to them but the three genin take his message to heart.

Their enemies are human and sometimes it is hard to do their shinobi duty.

Sakura stares at Haku’s grave marker covered in flowers that she and Naruto gathered from the area they met him. She can almost imagine his spirit hovering there, smiling down at them benevolently. Sakura knows that he died happy; serving the man he dedicated his entire life to.

She bows deeply to his grave and whispers for his ears alone, “Halcyon days, Haku.”

Sakura enjoys taking watch over her team.

Kakashi is unsure how to care for his students after the events of Mist but he brings his ninken out at Sakura’s suggestion. They all rest easier with fingers tucked into the warm fur of the dogs and arms filled with understanding and empathetic animals. Sakura knows that civilians sometimes use animal therapy and she thinks this is something similar, though these dogs are sentient. Naruto is still wary from survival training but he falls asleep in a pile with Bull, Shiba, and Bisuke.

Sakura stares at the stars as her team sleeps off their exhaustion. Ashura has volunteered to be sentry and Sakura trusts him intrinsically.

Indra sits with her and gazes into the fire.

Sakura sighs, closing her eyes against the memories of Mist. “Tell me a story,” she requests.

Indra glances at her, red eyes soft. “What sort of story would you like to hear?” he asks.

“Something about your life. Something not in the legends,” Sakura replies, hoping she is not overstepping boundaries.

Indra remains silent for a long while. Sakura stares at him anxiously until he says, “Very well. I’ll tell you the story of a great kuniochi and a traveling shinobi.”

Sakura watches him avidly as he begins to explain a part of his life never recorded.

“Hiroki was an amazing kuniochi,” Indra says. “She was from a small, rather weak clan. She was their only defense. This was how she met Hagoromo. He was exploring the wilderness when he
accidently entered her clan’s territory.” His face splits into a grin. “Hiroki was very protective of things she considered hers. She attacked Hagoromo and laid him out on his back.”

Sakura does her best to control her giggles, wanting to keep from waking up her teammates. “Then what happened?” she signs.

“He explained and Hiroki apologized for everything,” Indra continues. “She invited him to the clan’s compound in a show of good faith. Hagoromo fell in love with her compassion, energy, and wit. When he left to wander again, he invited her along. Hiroki wanted to go with him but she had a duty to her clan.

“She refused him. Hagoromo completely understood and promised to return soon. After his departure, Hiroki began to build up the defenses of her clan, erecting walls and teaching her clansmen to wield chakra. Upon Hagoromo’s return, she agreed to leave with him, because she felt that her people were protected. They set out together, though they returned every few years to see Hiroki’s kin.” Indra smiles. “And that is the story of the first established ninja village. It eventually faded into obscurity, but it is the model that all villages are based on now.”

Sakura regards him with wide eyes and a bright smile. “Is this a true story?”

Indra nods decisively. He hesitates before saying, “It is the story of my mother and my father.”

Sakura reaches out to Indra, placing her hand beside his incorporeal one. They cannot touch, but this is the closest they can get. He smiles guilelessly at her, returning his gaze to the stars above.

“Thank you for sharing, Indra,” she says sincerely.

“Don’t expect this to become a tradition, brat.”

It totally does. He and Ashura switch off on sentry duty while the other sits with Sakura and discusses anything and everything under the sun. She usually manages to weasel a personal story out of them each time.

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Ino is the one Sakura turns to after the debriefing.

She takes one look at her face when Sakura shows up unannounced and uninvited before pulling her inside.

“This calls for restorative hot chocolate,” Ino states, leading Sakura to the kitchen.

Aiko and Inoichi are sitting there, speaking in low tones. From the looks on their faces, they know how awry Sakura’s most recent mission has gone. Still, they are incredibly merciful in not drawing attention to the fact, merely brushing a comforting hand over her shoulders as they leave her in Ino’s capable hands.

They remain quiet as Ino finishes making their beverages before taking a seat beside Sakura.

“Here,” Ino says kindly, cornflower eyes full of empathy. “Whip cream and chocolate shavings, just like you like it.”

Sakura smiles in return, taking the drink gratefully. “Thanks Ino.”

They sit in silence for a while, just drinking their hot beverages. Sakura, feeling restored, finally
says, “The mission went...poorly.”

Ino furrows her brow. “I heard your team instigated a revolution and helped overthrow a tyranny. How is that a bad thing?”

Sakura shakes her head. “Not that part. I...met someone while I was there.”

“And what happened?”

“He died,” Sakura whispers. “Died doing protecting his most precious person.”

Ino eyes her speculatively. “He was your enemy.” It isn’t a question. Ino knows her too well.

Sakura nods. “We met before the battle. He was...kind and beautiful.”

Ino bites her lip. “You say he died for his most precious person. Do you think that is the way he would have wanted it?”

Sakura thinks of Haku and their shared promise, the smile on his face as he became Zabuza’s shield.

She nods hesitantly. “It is the death Haku wanted. I don’t feel satisfied though.”

“Of course not!” Ino declares passionately. “No one is happy when someone she cares about dies. It is a cruel thing, leaving behind the people who love you.”

“...I hadn’t thought of it that way,” Sakura admits.

Ino regards her seriously. “That’s why you have to be careful with your life. I know you can be kind of reckless, Sakura. Just remember, your life is not yours alone. Your death...it’ll make a major impact. Just think of Haku! Before you choose to make a sacrifice, think of us first.”

Sakura does not hide her tears from her oldest friend. “I will,” she promises. “I definitely will.”

“Sasuke-chan!” a voice chimes.

Sakura and Naruto turn from their seat in a tree to stare incredulously at their teammate as he lets out a long-suffering groan. Mikoto-san is the only one ever allowed to call him that.

“Damn it, Shisui,” Sasuke mutters.

Sakura turns, scanning the area. She has heard of Uchiha Shisui of the Body-Flicker Technique. Apparently his Shunshin is the most refined of any Konoha nin, allowing him to practically “teleport.”

“Hel-OW!”

An arm lands around Sakura’s shoulder before pulling away quickly in shock. Sakura cannot help a smirk; her hair accessories work.

She flips her braid with a bit of flare and turns to face the illustrious Shisui. He is shaking his arm and muttering to himself as Sasuke and Naruto are beside themselves with laughter. He is tall with curly dark hair and a wider nose than Sakura is used to seeing on an Uchiha profile.
“Serves you right,” she says snippily. “You should respect personal boundaries Shisui-chan.”

Ashura is laughing as well, while Indra bemoans the state of his descendants.

“Devil child,” Shisui pouts, straightening up. “Where on earth did you get an idea for a cruel trick like that?”

“Warring Eras,” Sasuke replies for her, coming to stand beside his teammate.

“Lots and lots of books,” Naruto says, joining her on the other side.

Sakura smiles warmly at them. “What they said,” she claims, crossing her arms across her chest. “Why are you here?”

Shisui eyes their united front with interest before holding up his hands in a peaceful manner. “I just wanted to see who my baby cousin and favorite aunt were spending their mornings with, that’s all.” Itachi and Mikoto still train Team Seven when they have the time. Sasuke has brought them over to his house for dinner so often now that they are a near constant fixture in the Uchiha compound. It is where they like to train in water walking. “After all, you brats must have a lot of potential for such attention from Itachi-chan.”

“No need,” Kakashi replies dryly. He is holding some official looking documents in hand. “I had some other supplies I had to grab before coming by.” Kakashi stares Shisui down. “Leave, hellion. Go harass some other genin team or your favorite cousin. Team Seven has some business to finish.”

Shisui casts them all a speculative look before disappearing completely. Sakura is impressed that he does not use hand symbols but Sasuke repressively mutters, “Idiot,” and that is that.

Kakashi gives his students an eye smile before crouching down and laying out the papers. “What I have here are affinity tests. Sakura mentioned it before our last mission and I thought now is as good a time as any to find out. Your affinity determines the type of ninjutsu that will come easiest to you, because of your chakra. Just pick up the paper, push your chakra into it, and watch the magic unfold.”

The children exchange glances until Naruto shrugs. “I’ll go first.”

He grabs the paper gingerly, treating it like a bomb tag. The paper slices neatly down the middle, one of the edges falling to the ground.


Sasuke sticks out his tongue at Naruto and grabs the paper. It ignites immediately, burning to a crisp.

“Fire,” Kakashi states with a nod. “Makes sense with that Uchiha heritage. Sakura?”
She steps forward, hands clammy. She is unsure what affinity she wants, perhaps earth? Maybe water? Sakura picks up the paper, holding her breath. She pushes a jolt of chakra into the paper, anticipation high.

Nothing happens.

Sakura furrows her brow, shaking the paper around.

Still nothing.

Sakura looks to Kakashi with anxiety who gazes at the paper pensively. He pulls out a thicker piece of paper and presents it to Sakura.

“This one is for people with multiple affinities. Try it.”

Sakura grabs the paper and repeats the process.

Once again, nothing happens.

Sakura gazes up at Kakashi in horror, fearful that there is something wrong with her. Kakashi, for his part, is stumped.

_Is this your fault?_ Sakura questions her inner self.

_Don’t point fingers at me!_ Inner snaps. _This is all you._

“Why isn’t it doing anything?” Naruto asks, picking up on Sakura’s anxiety. “Did you mess with it Kaka-sensei?”

Kakashi shakes his head, putting up his ever-present book. “I’ve never seen anything like this. I’ll…consult with some of the other jonin. Maybe they will know.”

He disappears in a flurry of leaves. Sakura glances at her teammates nervously, before gazing at Indra and Ashura.

“What’s wrong with me?” she asks quietly.

“There is nothing wrong with you Sakura-chan,” the Hokage says calmly.

Kakashi takes too long to get back to the team so Sakura decides to go to the fount of knowledge in the village. Sasuke and Naruto happily tag along.

“Why don’t the affinity tags work then?” Sakura demands.

Hiruzen puffs on his pipe, waving her forward. “Show me.”

Sakura pulls out both of the tags she tried to use earlier and sends her chakra into them.

Nothing happens.

Hiruzen nods. “There are some people, very rare mind you, who do not have a chakra affinity. It is generally because their chakra control is so fine-tuned. They do not need extra practice across versatile elements because their chakra adapts easily. I have only known one individual in my
lifetime like this: Uzumaki Mito-sama.”

Sakura exchanges shocked looks with her teammates. “Did you say Uzumaki?” she asks.

Hiruzen nods. “Yes, Naruto, she is one of your relatives. She married Senju Hashirama. Mito-sama mastered many ninjutsu because of her near perfect chakra control.” He pauses, surveying Sakura. “Mito-sama has some journals and documents she wrote detailing her experiences, if you’d like to look at them.”

Sakura nods enthusiastically.

“I’ll have Weasel bring them to you in a few days’ time when I find them.”

“Thank you Hokage-sama,” Sakura says, glancing at her teammate. “Would it be alright to share them with Naruto?”

The Hokage hides a smile. “Yes, that will be fine.”

The Rookie Nine, as Naruto has dubbed them, has called a meeting of utmost importance. They meet at Choji’s favorite restaurant, the Korean barbeque place downtown. Tenten is there as well, though she is not a one of the rookies technically.

“So,” Ino says leadingly. “Chunin exam. All of our senseis signed us up?”

The group nods. “Do you know anything about the exams?” Hinata asks Tenten. “Did you participate last year?”

“No, we did not,” Tenten replies. “Gai-sensei was worried about Lee; he cannot use chakra all that well.”

“My sister participated pretty recently,” Kiba chimes in. “She says it’s a blood bath.”

“There is a purpose to us meeting today. Why? Because Sakura called for this meeting,” Shino states.

Everyone turns to the girl in question who squirms a bit under the scrutiny. “Right,” she says, smiling at Ashura’s encouraging nod. “So, there’s actually a lot written on chunin exam strategies. Originally the promotions were just made in the field, not in a competition. The villages realized the money that could be earned by staging competitions so they started coming together to compete annually. They switch off every year.

“It’s Konoha’s turn this go-round, thankfully. We have home field advantage but we’re still going in not knowing who our enemies are or their skills. I wanted to gather everyone to make a pact that we will not attack each other in combat; at least until the staged competitions where we have no choice. Konoha nin stick together. Everyone in?”

To their credit, no one even hesitates. Everyone is in agreement here.

“I can’t make any promises for Neji,” Tenten explains. “Lee will undoubtedly be in full support. We can probably rein Neji in.”

Sakura puts her hand out, smiling as the others place theirs on top.
“To our bright futures,” Ino says.

“Fun battles,” says Kiba.

“Strong opponents,” Sasuke murmurs.

“Your joy,” Ashura announces.

“Good friends,” Hinata declares.

“Troublesome situations,” Shikamaru sighs.

“New opportunities,” Tenten corrects.


“Deepening friendships,” Choji adds.

“Your strength,” Indra rumbles.

“Unwavering support,” Shino murmurs.

“Our halcyon days,” Sakura completes.

Sakura meets Team Konohamaru while walking with Team Seven.

She also meets the siblings from Suna.

She is walking with Naruto and his admirers toward Ichiraku for lunch. Konohamaru is darting ahead, excited to be in the presence of his idol. Sakura is much more placid in her pace and Naruto slows to keep beside her.

They are discussing team strategies and the importance of Sakura’s hand signals when they hear Konohamaru’s cry. They exchange glances and race around the corner.

Konohamaru is dangling from his scarf in the grip of a boy decked in black clothing and purple face paint. Sakura examines his headband with trepidation.

The chunin exams have begun.

She quickly glances over the other individual, a tall blonde girl carrying a large fan. Sakura steps forward, hands raised calmly.

“What’s the problem?” Sakura asks.

“This little brat here ran into me and didn’t apologize!” the boy exclaims, shaking Konohamaru for emphasis.

Konohamaru kicks out at the boy. “Let me go you bastard!” he howls.

“Why you little--!” the boy raises a fist.

“You don’t want to do that,” Sakura says, eyes cold and hand on her kunai pouch.
The boy scoffs. “What? You gonna attack me pinkie?”

“Original,” Sakura says with a roll of her eyes. “In any case, I wouldn’t have to. You are a foreign nin, attacking one of the children of Konoha within the heart of Konoha itself. Is that really so smart? If any of us spike our chakra in typical distress form, an Anbu team would be here quickly.” Sakura sees a glimmer of doubt enter his eyes. “You will be kicked out of Konoha, at best, and disqualified from the chunin exam. We won’t need that though, now will we?” Sakura smiles sweetly.

The boy grumbles but the girl slaps his back and hisses, “Low profile, Kankuro!”

The boy, Kankuro, releases Konohamaru who runs back to the others. “I won’t forget that pinkie,” Kankuro spits.

A rock strikes him on the shoulder. “Don’t threaten my teammates,” Sasuke says, standing in a tree and crushing another rock in his hand. Sakura does her best to cover a snort at Sasuke’s ridiculous posturing.

“Kankuro, you idiot,” a monotonous voice rings. “Don’t make me kill you.”

Sakura raises her eyes to the late arrival. He is short, shorter than her, with red hair and the palest green eyes she has ever seen. A gourd is strapped to his back and Sakura can make out the kanji “love” on his forehead. He has some of the most dark, turbulent chakra Sakura has ever felt.

She sees Indra and Ashura exchanging worried looks and saying a word she does not understand. “Jinchūriki.”

She notices the fear on the Suna children’s faces. There is something incredibly off about this boy. In typical Sasuke fashion, he asks, “Your name?”

“My name?” the girl asks, fluttering her eyelashes. Sakura smiles wryly. Girls tend to like Sasuke’s pretty face until he opens his mouth. “It’s Temari.”

“No you,” Sasuke replies shortly, not even sparing her a glance as she turns disgruntled and disillusioned. His gaze is intently focused on Gaara. “You.”

“I am Sabaku no Gaara,” he says, eyes sparking with slight interest. “I apologize for my braindead teammates.”

“No harm no foul,” Sakura responds cautiously.

“And your name?” Gaara asks, still regarding Sasuke.

“Uchiha Sasuke.”

“I look forward to meeting you in the exam,” Gaara declares before starting to walk away.

“Don’t you want to know my name?” Naruto demands.

Gaara stops, turns, and looks him over for a moment with a smirk. His eyes meet Sakura and she fears the curiosity in them.

“Thank you for defusing the situation…” he trails off.

“Sakura,” she says evenly, hiding her unease over his interest.
“Thank you for defusing the situation Sakura,” he continues. “It would have been very…*uncomfortable* otherwise.” His gaze flashes to his teammates and Sakura sees how terrified they are.

With that, they walk off and Sakura is left with the distinct feeling that the exams have just gotten a lot more complicated.

Some nights Sakura sits on the roof of Naruto’s apartment so she can speak to Ashura. She cannot visit Indra as he is trapped in the heart of the Uchiha compound. There are too many prying eyes and penetrating stares for Sakura to sneak her way in there. They have found that Ashura and Indra can move up to forty yards away from their anchors and the roof is the perfect meeting place.

Tonight is one such night.

Ashura appears before her, smiling brightly. “It is good to see you,” he says.

“It’s good to see you too,” she signs back.

It has only been a few hours since they last saw each other but it is nice to have a private conversation. Ashura watches her attentively and Sakura knows he is worried about the encounter with the Suna nin.

“Why so worked up?” she teases, trying to get him to be upfront.

He and Indra can be a little overprotective of the only living being that can interact with them. Considering the trouble she and her team stumbles into on a regular basis, their worry is not unwarranted.

“I didn’t like that boy,” he responds seriously. “There is something wrong with him.”

“I noticed his chakra was volatile,” Sakura muses.

“It is more than that,” Ashura persists. She hasn’t seen him somber like this since Mist. “He is… different.”

“Does this have something to do with ‘jinchūriki?’” she asks. She scoffs at his incredulous face. “You forget that I’ve learned to read lips. And here you call yourself a great shinobi…”

“Watch it,” he warns playfully, a slight smile on his face. He likes this lighthearted, teasing Sakura. The one with few worries and burdens on her mind. She only lets her guard down like this with those she trusts intrinsically. Indra’s presence would make the moment perfect. “I *did* inherit my father’s legacy.”

Sakura rolls her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tell me something a history book hasn’t. Tell me about the jinchūriki,” she persists.

He sighs, caving easily. Neither he nor Indra can deny Sakura but Indra is usually more difficult to crack. “‘Jinchūriki’ translates as ‘power of human sacrifice,’” he explains. “They are humans who have one of the nine tailed beasts sealed within them. Do you know of the tailed beasts?” Sakura nods, eyes wide. Ashura sighs. “My father was the first jinchūriki; the ten-tailed beast Jūbi. He used its strength to help instill peace.
“Upon his death, however, fearing the Jūbi’s rage, he split it into nine lesser beasts. Make no mistake Sakura; though they are nothing compared to the Jūbi, these beasts are incredibly powerful and dangerous.”

Sakura nods. “I know. The Kyuubi ravaged Konoha a few months after I was born. The Hokage, his wife, and thousands of others were killed.”

“You know then, just how destructive these creatures are,” Ashura intones. “The villages seek to tame the tailed beasts; to weaponize them. The best way to do so is to implant them in a human being, thus creating a jinchūriki.”

“That’s…that’s horrible!” Sakura declares, eyes wide. “Why haven’t I heard about this? This is knowledge that should be made known to everyone!”

Ashura shrugs. “I am unsure. Since my rebirth into this world with Naruto, it seems that all documents regarding jinchūriki are sealed away.” He shakes his head. “It is a foolish practice of course, secreting away essential knowledge like that. I’d recognize a jinchūriki’s chakra anywhere though. Sabaku no Gaara is definitely a jinchūriki.”

“Wait,” Sakura pauses thoughtfully. “The Kyuubi was stopped by the former Hokage. Was it sealed into a jinchūriki?” Ashura shifts uncomfortably. Sakura analyzes him. “I’ll take that as a yes,” she says drily. “Have I encountered the jinchūriki?”

“It isn’t my place to say,” Ashura demurs, refusing to meet her eyes. “It is a citizen of Konoha and that is all I’ll say on the matter.”

Sakura watches him, knowing he will not budge. She has her private suspicions, but she merely exhales and flops on her back. “Well, be as secretive as you want,” she huffs. “I’ll just enjoy the stars; they won’t hide from me. Besides,” Her eyes gleam brightly. “I will find out who the Kyuubi jinchūriki is.”

Ashura moans, taking a place beside her. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

The written exam is a breeze but Sakura is concerned about this Forest of Death business. She is not a fan of this idea for a free-for-all. As the teams roam around with their release forms, Sakura gathers the Rookie Nine.

“I think it’s time to bring our decision to life; no attacking or sabotaging one another,” Sakura says. The others nod in resolute agreement.

“We’ll assist one another if we encounter each other,” Ino pledges.

Sakura grins. “I was actually thinking of something a little more diabolical.” The other genin regard her curiously. “I read over the rules and found that there is nothing about teams, well, teaming up.”

Sakura allows this to sink in. The others are regarding one another in a new found light.

“Go on,” Shikamaru prods, wanting Sakura to stop being so dramatic. He thinks Team Seven is a terrible influence on her.
“So, each team is going to get a scroll and begin searching for the matching one. Nobody will expect a group of nine genin lying in wait for whatever team may come into our path.” She sees their hesitant looks and forges on. “Look, it’ll work. The only thing that prevents other teams from doing this is the fact that they can’t trust one another. Guess what? We can.” Sakura looks at each of them solemnly. “I trust each of you with my life. I think I can trust you with finding three scrolls!”

Shikamaru sighs and looks to a determined Ino and a fierce Choji. “Cease your melodramatics, woman! Team Ten is in.”

“Count Team Eight in!” Kiba declares.

Sakura looks to Sasuke, hoping he will back up her plan and not allow pride to blind him. Naruto is watching him warily as well. “Team Seven as well,” Sasuke says, flush rising to his cheeks. “We’re going to kick the most ass.”

“How will we locate one another?” Choji asks.

Sakura and Ino glance at Shino, who nods. Ino points her thumb to him. “Shino can place a bug on each of us that will allow him to track us down. I think Kiba and Akamaru’s noses will be useful as well.”

Some squirm at the idea of a bug being placed on them, but they all agree. Shino sends out bugs to each of the genin and nods resolutely.

“Team Eight will find you when we get in,” he promises. “Let’s all group together before we begin sabotaging the other teams.”

“What about Tenten?” Hinata inquires.

They all exchange looks.

“Tenten does not trust her teammates, well, teammate around us,” Shino says reluctantly. “I can give her one of the bugs though. If she sends a jolt of chakra into it, I will know she’s in distress. We can all go in to help her out.”

Sakura nods in satisfaction as Ino and Shino amble off to find Tenten’s team. Her plan is coming together. She hides a snort as Ashura flashes a thumbs-up and Indra pushes him over, sending him sprawling. Her eyes blaze.

She (along with her friends) is a storm.

The competition does not know the hurricane they are about to encounter.

Orochimaru attacks them when the group has only one scroll left to find.

They have a nice system in place of setting up innumerable traps and allowing the Trackers (Team Eight) to draw in their enemies. They are always outnumbered and easily incapacitated, though the Rookie Nine are following a strict no kill policy. They seek to eliminate them from the competition, not eliminate them.

They have actually taken three scrolls so far, but they need one more Heaven roll to have a
Sakura is put on edge by the way that Ashura and Indra suddenly alert and 100% present. They usually do not do so unless they are conversing amongst themselves or with her.

Kiba is the next to notice. His hair stands up on end as Akamaru begins to growl.

The others quickly cue in.

“What is that?” Sasuke hisses. “Its chakra is stronger than a jonin’s!”

Hinata activates her Byakugan, surveying their surroundings. “Down!” she yells, falling to her stomach.

The others follow as a wave of kunai fly over their heads.

“Shino, can you send some of your bugs for help? Jonin, chunin, Anbu; it doesn’t matter!” Sakura whispers harshly to the boy, pulling a kunai out of her pouch. Ashura and Indra are more worried than she’s ever seen them. She would rather be completely overreacting and disqualified than passive and dead. Sakura sees Shino’s hesitation. “This chakra…it’s stronger than Kakashi-sensei. It is definitely not a genin.”

Shino nods decisively but Sakura doesn’t have a chance to worry anymore as she is suddenly paralyzed. She sees her own death, the deaths of her comrades, the death of Haku, the deaths of Indra and Ashura. It is much, much worse than Zabuza and Kakashi’s battle ever was. She cannot move, awash with helplessness and resignation.

Snap out of it! Inner Sakura demands.

Sakura regains enough of her senses to see a figure approaching. It is the creepy, long-tongued woman from Grass. For a moment, Sakura is puzzled that someone so young can have such power but she chooses to focus on freeing herself entirely from the stranger’s killing intent.

“What cute, smart genin,” the woman croons, sauntering into the middle of the clearing. She examines their paralyzed bodies with a wide, unnatural smile. “Such naughty children, cheating the system like this. What would your parents say?”

Indra and Ashura are hovering protectively at her shoulders, though Sakura knows they can do nothing in the physical realm. They sign words of comfort and encouragement to her, all the while glaring and scowling at the woman who holds them captive.

Sakura knows already, from the way this woman postures that she is a sadist.

If she and her friends cannot get out of this situation, they are in for a long, drawn-out death.

Sakura reaches deep inside, flooding her ultrafine chakra through her veins. It may be a waste but it gives her the shock needed to break free of the paralysis. Discreetly, as the woman panders on and on about something or other, Sakura reaches out a hand to Ino, shoving a jolt of chakra into her system. Blessedly, Ino makes no sound as she is facing Sakura and sees what she is doing. She nods ever so slightly.

Sakura, painstakingly slow, does the same to Shino on her other side. Unfortunately, he does not see Sakura’s motions and makes the slightest of noises.

The woman turns to them, eyes blazing with anger and, much more dangerously, curiosity. It is
quite obvious what is happening with Sakura’s hand on Shino’s back. “So the little mouse is free? How did the prey do that?” she asks, striding toward Sakura after she strikes the back of Shino’s neck.

Sakura prays that he is alive and merely unconscious.

Sakura, knowing that her cover is blown, backtracks shakily, staring up at this woman in horror. She is the embodiment of all of Sakura’s nightmares; a being so beyond Sakura’s power that a fight is laughable at best. She is outclassed and possesses only her wits and her weapons. Still, Sakura will do her damnedest, for the sake of her friends. She fingers her kunai and thinks of promises sealed with a kiss.

“If backed into a corner, the prey will bite back,” Sakura replies waveringly.

The woman throws her head back and laughs as if this is the most hilarious thing she has ever heard. “You are precious. If I weren’t here with a certain prize in mind— then I might take you. Alas, it isn’t to be.” Her hungry gaze turns to Sasuke and Sakura’s blood turns to ice. “You’ll make an excellent game though.”

“What do you want with Sasuke?” Sakura demands, trying to keep the attention on herself. Ino is unnoticed by the woman as she slowly assists the others and Sakura wants to keep it that way. “He hasn’t done anything to you!”

“That isn’t why I want him,” the woman says. “It’s for his lovely, lovely pinwheel eyes. The Sharingan.”

There is an inarticulate sound of rage from behind the woman. She turns as Sakura watches in horror as Sasuke jams a kunai into his thigh. It frees him of the killing intent, but he is certainly hampered in his movement.

“Naughty, naughty Sasuke-chan,” the woman coos, making her way toward him.

Sakura sees red and does something very, very stupid.

She flings her kunai at the woman, pulling her senbon from her hair. They are laced in a poison concocted by Ino, Aiko-san, and herself. It is painful and debilitating to a person’s motor skills.

Sakura does not expect the weapons to connect. She just wants to create a distraction. The woman whirls, catching the weapons in one hand. Her face is now unsmiling and Sakura knows she has made a major miscalculation.

“That was a bad decision, little mouse,” the woman says softly, disappearing and reappearing right in front of Sakura. “A bad decision indeed.”

“Sakura!” Hinata screams.

The woman turns, catching sight of all the genin standing before whirling back to Sakura, composure completely gone. “You little bitch!” She raises a hand to strike her and Sakura knows, just as she knows the sky is blue and Ashura and Indra are her best friends, that she is dead.

Several things happen at once.

Naruto’s eyes turn a brilliant red and his chakra reserves deepen tremendously as he yells, “Back away from her, teme!” It is a repeat of the mission to Mist and Sakura swallows back a hysterical giggle.
Sakura feels powerful chakra signatures converging on their location at a rapid pace. From the look on her face, the woman feels it too.

Indra, incensed with the woman’s endangerment of Sakura, strikes out at her with a powerful ninjutsu move, in response to the frustration and mounting helplessness he is experiencing.

*It connects.*

The woman goes flying away from Sakura’s position as Sakura stares up at Indra with wide, surprised eyes.

He stares back, equally mystified.

It quickly devolves into chaos from there.

Itachi and Shisui are the first to arrive on the scene.

They are expecting carnage; a complete decimation of the genin. Itachi is vibrating with anxiety and fury. His brother and his teammates are among this group and he fears the worst. It is lucky that he and Shisui can read the unique chakra signature on the Aburame’s insects. He knows the genin is a comrade of his brother’s and the insects are sending out a distress signal of highest importance. The scene that meets them is…different.

The nine genin are alive and whole, though sustaining injuries. All of them have pulled out their most powerful attacks in the hopes of fending off the enemy. Naruto and Shino are unconscious and on the ground. Choji has sustained a broken arm but still fights on. Still, they are holding their own against their enemy.

Itachi’s eyes narrow to slits and his Sharingan flares brighter than ever.

“He recognizes this enemy’s chakra as he has encountered him in the past.

“Orochimaru!” he bellows.

The woman turns to him and bursts into hysterical laughter before tearing her face off. “It is good to see you Itachi-kun. I knew you missed me.”

Itachi murmurs to Shisui, “Get these genin out of here. *Now.*”

Shisui nods, Shunshining to each of the genin and pulling them away from the battle.

Some go more willingly than others.

“I can’t leave!” Sasuke claims, bleeding from numerous wounds both self-inflicted and not. “I am not leaving Itachi-nii to this…this *thing!*”

“Your brother beat him once at the age of fourteen,” Shisui says, gathering the squirming, protesting boy into his arms. “He can certainly do it again.”

He does not give Sasuke the chance to reply as he Shunshins away.

The next to arrive are Kakashi, Kurenai, and Asuma. They take one glance at the situation and begin to leak killing intent themselves. After ascertaining the safety of their genin, they quickly
engage Orochimaru alongside Itachi.”

Sakura is one of the last to be picked up by Shisui. She shudders as Orochimaru glares at her through venomously yellow eyes. He knows that he cannot claim Sasuke here.

He also knows who is to blame.

“I will remember this,” he promises quietly.

Sakura cannot hear him but she can read his lips.

She blanches.

Orochimaru is gone in a flash and Sakura slumps against Shisui’s shoulder.

He is gone, at least for now. Sakura knows he will continue to haunt her nightmares.

“Are you okay?” Shisui asks as he Shunsins her to the rest of the genin. He can feel her thin shoulders trembling against his body.

She shrugs weakly, glancing around the room with interest. There are Konoha medics present, treating the worst of her friends’ injuries. The moment Shisui releases her, Sakura launches herself at her friends, checking them over as they do the same with her. “Where are we?” she finally asks after everyone has settled down and the adrenaline has worn off, leaving behind a bone-deep weariness.

“We’re in the tower in the center of the Forest of Death,” Itachi announces, walking into the room looking kempt and poised. He pulls out a Heaven scroll. “Team Seven, this is the one you needed?”


Itachi gives them a slight smile, eyes warming as he watches them all huddle together as a united front. “We will just say Orochimaru dropped it.”

He tosses the scroll to Sasuke who furrows his brow. “We didn’t earn this.”

“Maa, you certainly did,” Kakashi says as he slouches in. “You held your own against one of the Sannin until reinforcements arrived. That is more than any other genin teams can say.”

The Rookie Nine exchange startled glances. They know who the Konoha Sannin are. Hell, all of the shinobi nations know who they are.

“That was Orochimaru?” Kiba questions.

Asuma nods solemnly. “No other. You kids did something amazing there.”

“Whose idea was it to all team up in the Forest?” Kurenai asks, inquisitiveness writ across her face. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The group turns their gaze to Sakura who shrugs irritably. “What? I found a loophole and exploited it. Just like any self-respecting ninja would do.”

“I’m surprised you all were able to trust each other enough,” Shisui chimes in. “Generally such a thing is never suggested because it is a ninja’s way to be treacherous.”
“I’m not,” Asuma opines. “These kids have been training and sparring together since their Academy days. Becoming genin has only made their bonds stronger. Sometimes they even switch teams up for spars just to practice what it may be like on future missions.”

“How did you escape Orochimaru’s killing intent?” Itachi inquires. “It is his favorite form of ambush and against genin…well, we didn’t expect you to do so well.”

“Sasuke stabbed his leg,” Naruto declares. “Teme was trying to look all cool and stuff.”

“Ino freed me,” Shikamaru says.

“Me too,” agrees Hinata.

The others say similar things.

“How did you do it Ino?” Asuma asks gently.

She shrugs. “I copied what Sakura did. She…she jolted me with her chakra and it broke the hold. She kept Orochimaru distracted while I released the others.”

Everyone is regarding Sakura with interest now. The other genin had not seen her actions in releasing Ino. Sakura felt a flush stain her cheeks. She hates undeserved attention. Ashura is teasing her and she wants nothing more than to stick out her tongue at him. “I thought Orochimaru’s KI might be affecting my nervous system. The chakra pathways follow along the CNS pretty similarly so I thought disrupting my chakra might do the trick. It was a calculated guess.”

“It was correct,” Itachi corrects, smiling at her warmly. “It is no small feat to hold your own against a Sannin.”

Sakura shakes her head but doesn’t reply. She knows that she is extremely lucky. Many, many variables play into their victory tonight. Orochimaru made the mistake of underestimating them. He probably expected three genin, not nine. He also had no way of knowing about Sakura’s ghostly best friends. She knows that she must prepare for the next encounter. Sakura knows one is coming. Orochimaru is too obsessed to be hindered by one obstacle.

There is also the matter of his revenge.

Sakura shudders and closes her eyes, choosing to bask in her happiness. She is alive, her friends are alive, and they have completed another stage of the chunin exams.

“You all must be exhausted,” Kurenai says. “Choose a room and get some rest. There are a few more days before the next part of the exam.”

The genin look at each other, nonverbally agreeing to stick together, even in room choices. Sakura knows that this attack will leave invisible scars and unforeseen consequences. As she grasps Ino and Naruto’s hands for comfort, she can only hope they are prepared when they manifest.

Sakura stares up at the screen, distress clear on her face.

*Haruno Sakura vs. Yamanaka Ino*

She can clearly see the look of conflict on Ino’s face as well. Neither wants this.
They enter the arena.

Sakura stares at her closest friend in all the world. They have been together through so many things and Sakura knows she is a better person and ninja for it.

Sakura takes a deep, fortifying breath and does what may possibly be the scariest thing she has ever done.

“I forfeit,” she declares, ignoring the shouts and exclamations of indignation.

Ino is regarding her with horror and slight anger, but Sakura ignores it.

Hayate coughs into his fist, waiting for the racket to quiet down. “Are you sure Haruno-san?”

Sakura sees Indra looking at her with a puzzled expression but Ashura looks proud. She knows she is doing the right thing.

“I will not fight a Konoha nin,” she explains quietly, standing steadfast and resolute in her decision. “There is no point to winning such a fight. Either way, Konoha loses its strength. I am a student of the Will of Fire and I will not injure another Konoha nin in a real fight!”

Hayate shrugs, holding up a hand. “Winner of this round by default: Yamanaka Ino.”

Sakura ignores the jeers and taunts as she returns to her spot with her team. She does not regret her decision though her teammates regard her as if she is something alien or foreign. Kakashi seems intrigued.

“Why’d you do that?” Naruto asks.

“I won’t harm another Konoha nin, unless they have defected. It doesn’t fit the Will of Fire,” Sakura replies calmly.

“But I fought Kiba!” Naruto exclaims. “And you spar with Ino all the time!”

“Each of us has our own nindo. It is not necessarily a bad thing that you fought Kiba,” Sakura says. “This type of fight is different from a spar. We spar to improve ourselves and inspire comradery; this entire battle…it creates dissention. Our nasty sides are brought out. I would rather forfeit a thousand times over than accidentally hurt Ino.”

Sasuke shrugs. “It sucks that you forfeited though.”

“Chunin is just a title accompanied by an increase in pay,” Sakura says. “Ino is much more important.”

“That’s good to hear,” Ino says. Sakura turns, flushing slightly. “I was about to rip you apart for not taking me seriously, but hearing it this way…” She sighs. “I just can’t stay angry with you, Forehead.”

Sakura frowns, touching her forehead sensitively. She has moved past the bullies of childhood, but, well…old habits die hard. “What’s with the nickname?”

“That’s your punishment!” Ino sings.

Sakura just groans in response. “I’m already out of the competition, you pig!”

“What did you call me?”
As the girls devolve into bickering that draws all of Team Seven and Team Ten into the fray, Kakashi smiles and says quietly, “It seems one of my students inherited the Will of Fire, Obito, Rin.”

Sakura encounters Gaara while sitting on the roof of Naruto’s apartment. She is waiting for Ashura and gazing at the stars from her back when she feels sand tickle her bare arm. Her heart rate kicks and jumps but her voice is even as she asks, “Join me?” She is in control as she glances into the jaded gaze of the small boy. “Please?”

“Why?”

“Because it is nice to gaze at the stars with a friend.”

He tilts his head and mouths the word “friend” but settles into an uncomfortable seated position near her. They sit in silence and Sakura wonders why he has come. She sees Ashura materialize nearby but she gives no sign of noticing. She wants Gaara to make the first move.

He does.

“Why did you forfeit your match?” he asks solemnly.

Sakura turns to regard him with serious eyes. “As I said, I am a disciple of the Will of Fire.” At his confused look, she elucidates, “The Will of Fire states that Konoha nin are like family. We are all part of the Great Tree; many leaves but one body.”

Gaara looks lost. Sakura has a bit of a thing for lost people. She wants to draw him in and comfort him. She wants to be his friend.

“The girl I was to fight, Ino…she is my first friend,” Sakura explains. “She encouraged me when I was bullied and led me on the path to becoming a ninja. I love her.”

“Love?” the boy scoffs. “There is only one type of love: for yourself.”

Sakura shakes her head, heart breaking for this misled child. “There are many types of love, the least of which is for the self. I love Ino and my teammates and my friends. I even love my parents, though they are long gone.” Sakura frowns. “I love myself the least of these. I would give my life for any of the people I love.”

Ashura is gesturing for her to leave and get out of the situation as quickly as possible. Sakura gazes at him for a long while, trying to communicate that she will not.

“You see them,” Gaara says.

Sakura turns to him, startled. Ashura looks surprised too. “See who?”

“The ghosts,” Gaara clarifies, eyes hard. “I see the ghosts of all I’ve killed.”

Sakura does not flinch. They are ninja; killing is their career. “I see two,” Sakura says hesitantly, surprised at herself for even revealing the secret. No one else has ever been told, but she is willing to share this part of herself with this strange boy. “I did not kill them. They are from a time, a long time ago. They are my best friends,” she trails off wistfully.
“Why do you see them?” Gaara asks, curiosity shining in his round face.

Sakura shrugs. “I, that is, we think it’s because of the voice in my head,” she confides, still reeling from unburdening these secrets. She feels light; free. “She is called Inner Sakura. She has always been there.”

Gaara is regarding her with rapt attention. “What does this voice say?”

“It depends. Usually she encourages me to do my best and cheers me on when I am discouraged.”

Gaara scowls. “My voice isn’t kind like that. My voice tells me to kill and bathe in the beautiful red. My voice never lets me sleep.”

“I am sorry,” Sakura whispers, conveying true empathy. Of anyone, Sakura can understand the weight of having a voice in your head. She quietly thanks her inner self for not being homicidal.

Gaara stares her down intently. “The voice wants me to kill you. It demands it.” Sakura shivers.

“But I will not.”

With that, he disappears in a flurry of sand.

Sakura releases a sigh, lying down on her back once more. She knows she has narrowly escaped death for whatever reason. Ashura settles as close as he can to her, wrapping his arms tightly around her body. She cannot feel his incorporeal embrace, but it still brings comfort.

Tomorrow…tomorrow she will worry. Tonight she will gaze at the night sky with one of her closest friends and contemplate galaxies and times outside of her reach.

“Kunai or senbon?” Sakura asks, idly choosing between two nail polish colors.

“Good question,” Tenten replies. “I’d say kunai. Senbon may technically have more uses but put a kunai in my hand…”

They are in Sakura’s apartment playing a game of Would You Rather Ninja Style. They have spent the day training and are enjoying a relaxing evening the way they best know how.

Sakura eventually selects the lime green polish and begins to paint her toes.

“Would you rather fight with only your hands or only with your feet?” Tenten questions, focusing on her own maroon nails.

“Hands!” Sakura exclaims. “That way I can use ninjutsu.”

“No ninjutsu!” Tenten replies, wagging a finger in Sakura’s face. “Only taijutsu.”

“Probably feet then,” Sakura muses. “They are more powerful.”

They trade a few more questions back and forth before Sakura finally asks, “How are things with your team?”

Tenten’s face falls only slightly. “They’ve been…interesting. Gai-sensei and Lee are really upset with Neji but he doesn’t care. Lee has been really upbeat though about everything that’s happened to him.” Tenten wraps her arms around her knees. “It’s hard, you know? Gai-sensei is really
focused on Lee right now and he hasn’t really been training with me. Training with Neji is…”
Tenten rolls her eyes. “Constantly dramatic. He’s all ‘I know your fate is to lose’ and blah, blah, blah. Real downer.”

Sakura nods in sympathy. “You can always train with me. I’ve been working with this guy Kakashi-sensei knows. His name is Genma. He’s pretty good with weapons and stuff.”

Tenten’s eyes light up. “That sounds great! What has he been teaching you?”

“Mainly work with senbon and little with elemental jutsu with weapons,” Sakura says. “What’s your element?”

“Fire,” Tenten replies.

“Sweet!” Sakura crows. “I’ve been wanting to see if fire ninjutsu can add to the power of bomb tags. We can try it sometime.” Tenten stands, gathering her supplies. “Tenten?”

“Why wait?” she replies with a shrug. “The training grounds never close, though we have to be careful not to walk into someone else’s training. Let’s get to it!”

Sakura laughs and complies.

It is wonderful to have friends just as enthusiastic, if not more so, about training.

Sakura learns Naruto’s secret from Mito-sama’s memoirs. She has had her suspicions ever since Ashura’s reveal about the jinchūriki. There have been signs, especially with the treatment Naruto receives at the hands of the older generation. Mito-sama’s personal journals speak about her life, marriage, and the ninjutsu she developed.

It also speaks about her experience as the first Kyuubi jinchūriki.

She knows that Mito sealed the Kyuubi within herself and, when the time came, passed it onto another Uzumaki woman.

Uzumaki Kushina.

The wife of the Yondaime Hokage.

Naruto’s mother.

Sakura reads that the Kyuubi is susceptible to escape during times of birth. She also knows that Naruto’s birthday aligns nicely with the date of Kyuubi’s attack.

Sakura is immediately curious as to why the Hokage has offered her the journals. Undoubtedly, he knows the sensitive information it contains. She cannot help but wonder that he wants her to figure it out. Sakura nods decisively, sliding the book closed and leaving her apartment.

She has to find Naruto.

Sakura smiles as he opens the door, eyes wide in surprise. “Hi Sakura-chan! What are you doing here?”

“May I come in?” Sakura asks, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. She holds up a bag.
“I brought Ichiraku’s.”

His eyes light up with excitement and he eagerly opens the door. Ashura is watching her with resignation and Sakura gives him a slightly guilty smile. “Could we get some privacy for this conversation?” she asks him, knowing she cannot have this discussion with him present.

He nods, slipping through the floor. Sakura thinks he will still hear what they say but at least she will have the illusion of privacy.

The duo breaks their chopsticks and begins to eat. Sakura, used to Naruto’s eating habits, has brought him six servings of his favorite type of meat as well as two of his second favorite.

“What brings you here, Sakura-chan?” Naruto asks, keen eyes perceptive. “We usually just meet at Ichiraku.”

“I needed to speak with you without prying ears,” Sakura explains, standing and slapping a “no noise” tag on the door.

“About what?” Naruto inquires warily.

“Allow me to tell you a story,” Sakura says instead, resuming her seat. “There was once a brave woman known for her beautiful red hair. She was greatly feared, however, because a beast lived inside this brave woman. She was a shinobi and she fell in love with a great leader. They were truly, deeply in love and decided to have a child.”

“Sakura,” Naruto mutters.

She presses on, “The brave woman gave birth to the son she so loved. Unfortunately, the beast escaped from within her. It was forced out of her by an evil man. The masked man. She, alongside her husband, gave their lives defending the nation they so loved and sealed the beast within their son.”

“Sakura, please,” he says weakly.

Sakura feels tears in her eyes and on her cheeks. She continues heedlessly, “They wanted him to be a hero; to be celebrated by the village for the sacrifice that he and his parents were forced to make. Unfortunately, the villagers were repulsed by this innocent child; seeing only the beast within. The new leader, who was actually the older leader, mandated that no one could speak of that night in hopes of protecting the boy.

“The boy grew up lonely and fearful. Now, though, now he has a family of his own. He has teammates who will support him no matter what,” Sakura says solemnly, staring deep into Naruto’s eyes. Both are crying at this point. “Because his family knows that he is not the beast inside him. His family knows that he is a hero because he holds the beast at bay. I trust Uzumaki Naruto.” Sakura smiles. “I will support him when he is Hokage like his father before him.”

Naruto grabs her, hugging her fiercely as he shakes violently. The children cling to each other, glad that this dark secret has finally come to light. Sakura wonders when, if, she will tell him and the others of the things she sees.

“Thank you,” he finally chokes out. “I was going to tell you…”

“Don’t worry about it Naruto,” Sakura interrupts, holding him close. “I love you. You are my family.”
“How’d you find out?” he asks after they have cried out all their tears. He swipes at his red-rimmed eyes.

“I read Mito-sama’s journals. There are…accounts of your parents in there.” Sakura pulls out the memoirs. “These are for you. You can learn more about your family.”

“Was my dad really Hokage?” Naruto questions, seeming dazed.

Sakura nods. “Apparently he and your mom were some of the best leaders this village has ever seen.” She grins brightly. “There is no doubt in my mind that you will be Hokage. Sasuke and I’ll be there every step of the way.”

“Promise?” he asks, eyes watery again.

“It’s the promise of a lifetime,” Sakura replies, linking pinkies with him.

Naruto’s fight against Neji is legendary.

In typical Naruto fashion, he berates the other genin, shattering his faulty perspective and coming out triumphant. The other fights are not nearly as flashy and Sakura smirks as Shikamaru forfeits his match. It is a very Shikamaru move and Sakura knows that Ino is going to rebuke him for years to come though she is currently nervous about her match with Shino that comes after Sasuke’s.

Sasuke is late. He has been training with Kakashi, Mikoto, Itachi, and Shisui nearly the entire month and she has only caught a couple glimpses of him and Indra. She herself has remained busy as well. She has found many mentors and friends in the month of training. The Hokage trains with her when he can (which is rare) but he gives her scrolls that are crucial in the development of her ninjutsu arsenal. She trains with both Kiba and Hinata along with Kurenai-sensei. Sakura has even found a mentor in Genma, one of Kakashi-sensei’s colleagues. He helps her in honing her senbon skills as well as her proficiency with other weapons. She has unfortunately been unable to train with Ashura or Indra but she follows the guidelines they have given her.

She misses her friends, both of them. When Sasuke arrives though, she cannot help but roll her eyes. Trust Sasuke to be the most dramatic of the genin, though Neji can certainly give him a run for his money.

The Uchiha are known for their melodramatic theatrics.

She greets Indra with as much enthusiasm as she can with so many shinobi around and she, Indra, and Ashura take a seat to watch the ensuing fight.

As Sasuke steps into the arena, Sakura cannot help but frown at Gaara. She wouldn’t say that she necessarily fears him, though she knows she should. He is so lost and misguided that Sakura wants to help him. She knows though that people can only truly be helped if they wish to be.

He seems more agitated than usual, his sand dancing around him in excitement.

She catches Sasuke’s eye and signs to him, “Good luck!”

He grins cheekily in response, saluting her.

“What a show-off!” Naruto grumbles, falling into the seat where Indra is seated. Indra moves
disgruntledly to stand to the side.

Sakura watches with ratcheting anxiety as Gaara seems to become less and less in control as Sasuke manages to land hits on him.

Something is about to go wrong, Sakura can feel it viscerally deep in her bones.

Gaara is changing, becoming the beast within as Sakura leaps to her feet.

Her world goes dark.

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Sakura wakes to a world on fire.

It has only been a few moments, this she knows. Still, this…this invasion has been planned out perfectly. There are Sound nin attacking and assassinating those still sleeping. Sakura watches as Gaara is gathered by his siblings and taken from the fray.

Sasuke follows. Indra rants and raves at the foolhardy boy but if Sasuke is anything aside from dramatic, he is relentless.

Shino is awake and Sakura turns to him desperately. “Please follow him. I’ll be along shortly.” She looks helplessly at the sleeping genin. “I need to wake them first.”

Shino smiles slightly at her. “I owe you for the Forest of Death.”

Sakura clasps his forearm. “You do not owe me anything; friendship isn’t about a tally. Still, I thank you.”

He departs and Sakura gets to work waking her friends. Ino is, understandably, pissed when she finds Shikamaru merely faking sleep.

She kicks him in the side.

The genin defend their area from the Sound nin while trying to come up with a plan. Sakura recognizes Kabuto from the beginning of the exams. Apparently, he is a traitor.

“What’s the plan?” Kiba demands, teeth bared at their enemies.

“I need to go after Sasuke,” Sakura replies before suddenly paling. “Shit!” The others turn to look at her for her uncharacteristic cursing. “We need to send people to the Academy. I’m sure the enemy will be gunning for them for leverage.”

“I’ll go,” Tenten volunteers, lithe and lethal in her attacks. “I’ll need Kiba, Choji, and Hinata.”

“Go!” Sakura calls, still waking people under the genjutsu. “Things are covered here.”

“Nice leading, Sakura,” comes the sardonic drawl of her erstwhile sensei. “Glad to see you’ve kept your skills sharp this past month.”

“Of course,” she grunts.

“Naruto! Listen up! I’m assigning you two your first A-ranked mission since Mist! Your mission is to retrieve your headstrong teammate.” Kakashi turns to Sakura. “Your lead. You proved yourself
in the Forest of Death. I trust your judgment kid. You know these genin best. Who do you need?”

Sakura looks around in contemplation. “Everyone left. Their kekkei genkai may prove invaluable. Shino’s already out ahead. We need to leave quickly.”

Kakashi nods and summons a few of his ninken. “Pakkun, find Sasuke. Akino, Bull, Urushi, protect the brats. Head out!”

The group departs, following Pakkun’s nose. Sakura glances at Ashura nervously. This is her first, official lead and she fears the consequences of a single misstep. There is no room for error. Ashura gives her encouragement. They follow a more or less linear path and Sakura does her best to ignore the destruction of her village as she becomes all the more focused.

This is her home; the most sacred of places to her.

They have ruined the idea of the chunin exams, a time to bring the shinobi nations together in unity.

Her anger is refined and lethal; cold in her intense fury.

There is a storm beneath her skin, itching to break free and wreak havoc upon these invaders.

She will not hold back.

It is time to avenge Konoha.

Sakura has never seen raw power like this.

Gaara, nearly fully Ichibi, is soundly thrashing Sasuke. Ino has stayed behind to fight Kankuro, assured in her skills in poison to take him on. Sakura is full of confidence in her oldest friend. Shikamaru and Shino are fighting Temari and a few of chunin teams who are trying to convene with Gaara. Each group has one of Kakashi’s ninken with them.

Sakura sends a quick prayer to the universe that her friends come out alright.

She doesn’t think she will.

She drops down beside Sasuke, grabbing him and Shunshining him out of the fray.

“What the hell, Sakura?” he demands.

She smacks him. “You’re an idiot!” she declares, glancing around the side of the tree. Naruto and Pakkun are distracting Gaara and Sakura is thankful for Naruto’s clone technique. “Why’d you go off on your own?”

“Just finishing up our exam fight,” Sasuke says, looking slightly uncomfortable.

Sakura groans. “You don’t get it do you? Konoha is under attack. We don’t have time for your stupid pissing contest with the enemy. Our friends are out there, possibly dying and we can’t help them because we had to come after your sorry ass.” She is cursing, but she doesn’t care. She is just so unbelievably angry that Sasuke has put them in this situation.

“…Sorry,” he says, eyes wide. He has not considered the ramifications of his actions.
Sakura shakes her head. “Just be aware in the future.”

“Sakura-chan!” Naruto yells. “Need some help over here!”

Sakura assesses Sasuke. “What is the most powerful fire ninjutsu you know?” she asks.

“Katon: Housenka no Jutsu or Katon: Ni,” he replies readily.

“How many Chidori can you do in a row?” Sakura presses. Kakashi has been teaching the both of them his special technique. Sakura can do three before completely losing all chakra.

“Two,” Sasuke says.

Sakura nods. “Alright. We need to strike Gaara’s sand with the hottest techniques you have. Katon: Ni is probably your best bet. Use Chidori as your last resort.” She stands, pulling bomb tags from her pouch. “Follow my lead.”

She steps out from behind the tree, confident now that she has a plan. Naruto is running around just out of Gaara’s reach as he sends sand to destroy his clones. Naruto is holding up well but flagging fast. She is glad that Gaara is distracted as she throws her tags at Gaara. She nods to Sasuke and hopes that he will follow her lead.

“Katon: Ryukka no Jutsu,” Sakura recites, going through the hand signs as she strikes out at her bomb tags.

A dragon made entirely of fire flows from her mouth and hits the bomb tags as Sakura throws herself back from the ensuing explosion. She sees Sasuke take her hint and do the same. Sakura is grateful for the experiments she and Tenten have performed.

“Get down,” she calls to her teammates as she covers her head.

As the smoke clears and her ears stop ringing, Sakura sees that Ashura and Indra are bracketing her on both sides. Gaara is unconscious and Sakura sees that some of his sand is now glass and appears to be useless to him. Sakura realizes her mistake.

Gaara, unconscious as he is, is taking on the Ichibi’s full form.

Sakura glances at her ghostly companions with the slightest of smiles, reaching for their hands. They offer them readily and Sakura almost swears that she can feel the warmth and pressure of their hands.

She shakes her head wryly.

There is no time for sentimentality.

Her teammates stand beside her now and Sakura knows assurance like never before.

“This fight is ours,” Sakura says. “Sasuke, you and I are going to keep Gaara occupied. Naruto, you think you can summon one of the toads?” He nods. “Good. Pakkun, stay safe. Let’s go.”

She and Sasuke begin their attacks once more, Sakura striking at Gaara’s sand with Chidori. She knows that, upon taking his full form, Gaara will not be stopped by these paltry attacks. She can only hope that Naruto has truly learned Jiraiya-sama’s summons because Gamabunta may be their only chance unless they tap into the Kyuubi’s chakra. In Sakura’s mind, this is the last resort.

Sakura flips backward, dodging Gaara’s sand claw.
“Protect Naruto!” she calls to Sasuke, throwing another tag bomb and Chidori at Gaara.

The distraction works, drawing Gaara’s full attention to Sakura.

*Oh shit,* Inner Sakura sums up the entirety of Outer Sakura’s mindset.

“Gaara!” she yells, fleetingly thinking herself insane. Still, she must continue for the protection of her family and her nation. “Remember yourself!”

Gaara, Ichibi, *whoever* he is, roars in response.

Sakura winces but presses on. “Gaara, you…I told you my secret. Voices…ghosts…you and I, we’re similar. No one else knows! Don’t you remember the promise you made me on that roof?”

He hesitates, ever so slightly and leaves Sakura open to throw another Chidori his way. Some of his sand crystallizes to glass. She knows it is futile, but she hears an unknown, gravelly voice.

Naruto has succeeded.

Gaara is coming her way and looks more focused than ever. He does not see the large orange toad behind him, striking out with a sword. Sakura looks to Ashura and Indra and grins even as she is enclosed in the sand claw.

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Sakura wakes to white walls and antiseptic.

She startles, pulling out the lines attached to her.

“Maa, Sakura-chan, careful,” Kakashi-sensei says soothingly.

Sakura turns her wary gaze to her teacher. “What happened?” she inquires.

He grips his chin. “Hm, well Konoha came out on top. The Hokage has taken the Ichibi into custody, thanks to the work of you and your teammates. Suna surrendered as soon as they realized that Sound played them. Orochimaru assassinated their Kazekage and posed as him. He instigated Suna’s actions.”

Sakura’s eyes slide close in relief. “And my other friends?”

“Tenten and her ragtag team mounted an enthusiastic defense of the Academy and its students. The instructors there were very grateful. Ino used her own concoction of poisons to incapacitate Kankuro. Shino and Shikamaru are fine though they are being treated for chakra exhaustion. Sasuke is being heavily berated by his family members for his reckless actions though they are proud of him. And Naruto…he’s been bragging to anyone who will listen about Team Seven.”

Sakura grins. Her family is safe and so is Konoha. Maybe they have more scars than before; maybe there will be a period of restoration but they are whole.

“What’s the damage?” she inquires.

“Two broken ribs, extensive damage to your right hand, and chakra exhaustion,” Kakashi recites. “The healers have fixed most of the nerve damage, but expect twinges during drastic changes in weather. It might take you a little longer to form hand signs. Your ribs are mostly healed, though it should heal naturally in the next few weeks.”
Sakura nods. “It’s better than I expected.”

“She wasn’t the only reckless one,” Kakashi remarks, eye staring her down.

Sakura refuses to budge. “I took a calculated risk; Sasuke lacked foresight. I knew that, without Naruto’s summons, we couldn’t face Gaara. Sasuke had already expended more chakra than I had… I was the best choice for distraction.”

“That doesn’t make you expendable,” Kakashi replies sternly.

“I don’t think I’m expendable. Still, if it’s a choice between myself and my teammates…I think you already know what I will choose.”

Kakashi sighs. “Turning my own teaching against me. You’re so not cute.”

“You’re stuck with me Kakashi-sensei,” Sakura replies. “Even if we take ten years off your life.”

He ruffles her unbound hair. “Stay alive; that’s all I ask.”

Sakura regards him solemnly. “I will do my best.”

_______________________________________________________

“Jiana Tenten,” the Hokage calls.

Sakura cheers alongside the Rookie Nine as Tenten approaches the platform. In the aftermath of the ambush, the Hokage wants to celebrate something positive and good. They are in a small private pavilion attended by Konoha ninja and civilians alike. This year, in light of the attack, it has been decided that the Kage of each village makes their own promotions.

“For your intelligence and bravery in leading a team to defend the Academy students during the attack, I award you with the promotion to chunin!” the Hokage declares, passing Tenten a flak jacket and updated dog tags.

She remains on stage, beaming wildly as Hiruzen cries, “Nara Shikamaru!”

Shikamaru slouches toward the stage, an embarrassed flush rising on his neck. Sakura points it out to Ino who wolf-whistles to the boy. He groans and mutters, “Troublesome,” under his breath.

“For your ability to understand your own limits in the exam, as well as your assistance in stopping the Ichibi, I award you the promotion to chunin!”

Shikamaru grabs the jacket and tags, doing his best to disguise his smile.

“Haruno Sakura,” Hiruzen intones.

Sakura steps forward on the platform, smile stretching across her face.

“For your performance in the exams, as well as your leadership of a team in stopping the rampaging Ichibi, I award you with the promotion to chunin!”

Sakura grins ebulliently, taking the items and moving to stand between Tenten and Shikamaru.

“Everyone, please applaud your new Konoha chunin!”
Sakura surveys the crowd, smiling at all of her friends. Sasuke and Naruto are standing in a cluster of Sakura’s Uchiha friends. The Rookie Nine are gathered with their families and Sakura is glad to see Tenten’s entire team is present. Ashura is more enthusiastic than even Naruto, bouncing around all over the place and shouting his excitement to the skies. Sakura is somewhat glad she cannot hear him. Indra is smiling, truly smiling, and standing proudly on the outskirts of the crowd. He is proud of all she has accomplished.

Sakura looks out at her friends, eyes closing as she soaks in this feeling of true happiness.

*I’m finding it, Haku, she thinks ecstatically, our halcyon days.*

Chapter End Notes

and here we are, guys. it’s been a wild ride. favorite parts? mine would probably be indra’s story or gaara and sakura’s rooftop talk. oh, or ino and sakura’s fight (or lack thereof). man, or the haku part or the rookie nine shenanigans. honestly, I loved it all. it’s probably why it was so easy to write. I did say this fic is my wish fulfillment of some version of canon. anyway, please drop a review and let me know what you think.

-jay
chūnin part I

Chapter Notes

this chapter will take us straight into complete AU, no apologies. also, I’m sorry for not clarifying this in the narrative in the last chapter, but gaara does not actually see ghosts. he is just constantly tormented with hallucinations by shukaku who is beyond sadistic. so, yeah. thank you all for the reviews on the last few chapters. I am glad that ya’ll are enjoying the story so far. this section is going to be split into separate parts because it is ridiculously long. it means this update could come out earlier so yay.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Team Seven is sent, along with a few other teams, to accompany the Suna siblings home. Their treaty is still in effect and everyone knows that the Suna ninja were acting on Orochimaru’s, disguised as their Kazekage, orders. Suna is a land that is harsh and brutal and its people reflect their environment.

Sakura has the opportunity to get to know her former enemies and current uneasy allies better. Ashura is infuriatingly overprotective and Indra is just as obnoxiously paranoid, but Sakura understands the value of offering friendship.

She thinks of eyes the color of the sky, a crimson ribbon, and an unshakeable relationship that has completely shaped her.

So she extends the proverbial olive branch, talking weapons with Temari, swapping poison secrets with Kankuro, and discussing strategy with Baki.

With Gaara…Sakura treats him as a human being, speaking to him and asking him questions about his likes, his dislikes, and his habits.

It is…a rough start.

Gaara has no understanding of social niceties. Sakura keeps her expression smooth as he stumbles through the conversation, speaking of death and killing and blood. He seems hesitant, especially with the looks and sounds they receive from both her team and his. Still, Sakura persists and is eventually rewarded.

“I like…cacti,” Gaara says, glancing askance at her.

Sakura’s entire countenance brightens even as his siblings gasp.

“I…I didn’t know you liked cacti,” Temari murmurs, exchanging wide eyed glances with Kankuro.

“That’s great Gaara,” Sakura claims, jumping to another tree. She wants to encourage this breakthrough, not embarrass him into silence. “I wish I’d known before we left Konoha; Ino has a great collection of all sorts of plants.”

Gaara nods. “Your…friend. She is the one you faced in the preliminaries?”

“Yeah,” Sakura replies, smiling wryly. “Though ‘faced’ may not be the best word for it.”
“She was promoted as well?” he asks, eager to continue the conversation.

“No,” Sakura says. “Unfortunately not. She’s excited for the next chunin exam though! She and Hinata have already started training.”

Gaara watches her, unsure of how to continue the conversation. Ashura is pouting over the attention Sakura is giving the boy. Indra is unamused.

Sakura just thinks Gaara’s adorable.

“Give me your address when we get to Suna,” Sakura says, leveling him with a bright grin. “I’ll make sure to send you some of Ino’s cacti, maybe there will be some you haven’t seen before.” Her eyes light up. “Oh! We can write letters! I’ve always wanted a pen pal!”

He watches her warily. “This will make you happy?” Sakura nods. “Alright. I’ll be your pen pal.”

Sakura ignores the incredulous stares of the people traveling with them, along with Ashura’s indignant shouts. They don’t have a say in this friendship. She appreciates the concern but she knows Gaara is not a threat.

All Sakura cares about is the slight, private smile curling up Gaara’s lips.

She’ll treasure it for the years to come.

A woman named Chiyo is elected interim Kazekage.

She is short, squat, and ancient, but Sakura knows she has a spine of steel, despite how curved it may be with age.

After all, the Konoha Bingo Books do not term her “Poison Mistress” lightly.

“Kazekage-sama,” she intones with a bow, nudging her teammates into doing the same. It would be unwise to underestimate this woman. “We are in your care.”

Chiyo does not even glance at them, instead staring at Kakashi intensely. “Hatake-san,” she greets evenly, eyes narrow.

“Kazekage-sama,” he responds, eye crinkling in a cordial smile. Sakura notes that he remains tense and poised.

There is a history there, though Sakura knows not the details.

She wants to though.

They finish jumping through the normal diplomatic procedures and Gaara drags her off toward the Suna greenhouses after she promises her team and his siblings that they’d all grab dinner together. She has always wanted to try authentic Suna cuisine.

“There is a collection of cacti of different breeds in the greenhouse,” Gaara says, ignoring the awed and fearful glances the Suna citizens are casting them. Sakura, however, frowns in consternation. “Chiyo-baa-sama has been cross breeding them with some interesting results. She keeps the special ones in the greenhouse.” He hesitates and looks to her. “Your friend may like one?”
Sakura grins. “She’d love that. Thank you for thinking of her.” Sakura doesn’t mention that Ino would probably kick her ass for getting close to the blood-thirsty boy. “You won’t get in trouble for giving me one?”

He shrugs. “It doesn’t really matter to me.”

“You’re a good friend Gaara.”

Gaara flushes a deep red and they remain in silence the last few minutes to the greenhouse.

It is expansive, undoubtedly to house the myriad plants from all sorts of climates. They enter and Sakura notes how there are segmented sections, probably to control temperature and sunlight. The first room is remarkably cold and filled with shrubs and firs of a large variety.

Gaara ignores these, weaving through a dizzying array of sections until they arrive at the cacti section. Sakura eyes the plants with admiration, unable to recognize over half of the species.

“This is amazing Gaara!”

Gaara smiles tentatively in response. “You like it?”

“Definitely,” she agrees warmly. “Show me your favorites.”

He leads her to a small section of colorful cacti that is separate from the others. “Chiyo-baa-sama lets me come here and breed my own cacti as long as they don’t interfere with hers or the gardeners’.” He surveys the motley collection before carefully picking up one of the succulents, a rounded cactus with long spikes and pink flowers. Gaara holds it out to her bashfully. “This one is for you.”

“For me?” Sakura asks, gently cradling the cactus in her arms. “Gaara, I couldn’t—“

“It’s like your hair,” he states abruptly, eyes warming with amusement. “It’s beautiful and deadly.”

Sakura snorts. “In other words, it’s pink and covered in spikes?”

Gaara nods and the children devolve into helpless giggles. Sakura is happy to have this moment with her new friend, especially since she knows he has had little to laugh about in his life. The two eventually settle onto a bench, surveying the garden.

“Do you have a dream?” Gaara asks suddenly.

Sakura turns to him, brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Naruto told me during our fight that he was fighting for his dream,” Gaara explains, looking confused. “What did he mean?”

“Naruto’s dream is to become the Hokage,” Sakura responds, gazing out into the distance and smiling fondly at the thought of her blond teammate. “He wants to prove himself to Konoha so he is never ignored again.”

“But why?” Gaara inquires. “The villagers despise m—jinchūriki. Why would he want to lead them?”

Sakura shrugs. “Naruto is Naruto. He wants to change the way that the village perceives him. Did you know that jinchūriki were supposed to be honored and respected originally for their brave sacrifice?” Her face twists with a scowl. “Unfortunately, people fear what they cannot understand.
or do not try to understand and that fear leads to resentment and hatred. No longer are the jinchūriki revered; they’re despised.”

“But you don’t agree,” Gaara says softly after a long pause.

Sakura shakes her head vehemently. “No I do not. Sasuke doesn’t either. People who know Naruto don’t agree. Sasuke’s dream is to become the chief of the Konoha Police so he can help civilians overcome their fear of ninja in general and of Naruto in particular.”

“And what is your dream?”

Sakura ponders. What is her dream? Itachi’s dream is to lead the Uchiha into an age of prosperity and peace where they are no longer feared in the village. Ino’s dream is to become the next Poison Mistress and surpass her parents’ legacy. Kiba’s dream is to assist Hana in her veterinary. Hinata’s dream is to be recognized by her family and overcome the Uchiha and Hyuuga hostility. Tenten’s dream is to follow in Tsunade-hime’s footsteps. But what is her dream?

Sakura turns to gaze at Gaara seriously. “My dream…my dream is to protect the dreams of my friends.” She thinks of Ashura and Indra. “And to figure out the ghost thing.”

Gaara nods. “Those are…good dreams. My old dream…it was selfish, but I have a new dream now.”

“What is that dream?” Sakura probes softly.

He regards her with pale green eyes. “I will become the next Kazekage. I will overcome the prejudice of jinchūriki.” His lips curl up slightly. “I will help make other people’s dreams a reality; just like you.”

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The interim Kazekage corners her one lazy afternoon before her team’s spar with the Suna siblings.

The bureaucracy has deemed fit to make revisions to the original treaty between Konoha and Suna in light of recent events. Konoha sent a revised version with Team Seven to Suna. Sakura is completely fine with this, but the Suna Council is taking quite some time in hammering out details and “counter-revisions” to this new treaty. In the meantime, Team Seven is given pretty much free reign of Suna and all it has to offer. Thus far, Temari has been the best tour guide, introducing them to the unique cuisine and fashion of Sunagakure.

“Haruno!” a voice barks out as Sakura is making her way out of the greenhouse.

Sakura turns, catching sight of Chiyo-baa-sama approaching her from one of the other sections. Sakura bows slightly. “Kazekage-sama.”

The woman cackles. “I knew you’d be the most polite of the brats. The Uchiha may have clan breeding but he is still an Uchiha.”

Sakura, unsure of how to respond, merely watches the woman warily. She knows that the Uchiha, while loved in Konoha, are reviled as jutsu vultures, easily stealing jutsu kept secret and passed down for generations.

“You’re cautious,” the woman observes with a satisfied nod. “That’s good. It’ll keep you alive.”
“Thank you,” Sakura replies, still unsure of the woman’s angle.

“Calm down girlie,” the Kazekage states, ushering her back into the greenhouse. “I just want to get your opinion on your visit to Suna.”

Sakura highly doubts that is the reason for the very busy Kazekage to accost her but she follows along anyway. It isn’t like she has much choice in the matter. The older woman leads her into a section Sakura has yet to visit but is greatly interested in.

Poisonous plants.

Chiyo laughs outright at the glint in Sakura’s eyes. “I thought these might interest you,” she comments as she links arms with the genin and guides her through the garden of lethality and beauty, pointing out the different types. “The puppeteers of Suna use this greenhouse for a very specific purpose…” she trails off, regarding Sakura shrewdly. “You knew that already though, didn’t you?”

Sakura smiles but refrains from commenting.

“I had a hand in Kankuro’s training, so imagine my surprise when I find that he was beaten at his own game. By a Yamanaka nonetheless!”

“What’s wrong with the Yamanaka?” Sakura bristles defensively in regard to her oldest friend.

Chiyo waves a hand dismissively. “Nothing against them in particular. Most kekkei genkai users rely too heavily on their ‘unique’ gifts to their own detriment. The Yamanaka are much the same. So, imagine my surprise when I hear that Kankuro was incapacitated by a potent cocktail of paralytics created by the Yamanaka heir herself.”

“She’s good at that sort of thing,” Sakura replies, thinking back with a shudder on the tests they performed on themselves to heighten their immunity to the drugs. Aiko was not pleased with them to say the least and she is merciless when angry. “Always has been.”

Chiyo hums, obviously unfinished with her story. “Kankuro and Temari have both told me of your interest in poisons. Gaara of all people informed me of your friendship with the Yamanaka heir.”

Sakura shrugs. While not common knowledge, it does neither herself nor Ino harm in letting this woman know the truth. “We’ve dabbled.”

Chiyo assesses her for a long while and Sakura cannot help wondering what she sees and what she looks for. Finally, her face cracks into a smile. “You’re an odd bird. Don’t think I didn’t notice your booby-trapped hair; you have the mindset of a child of war.”

“I just enjoy reading books on the Warring Eras,” Sakura protests mildly.

“Keep the mindset; dark times are ahead,” Chiyo says, waving her weak protestations away and grabbing a strange purple and speckled yellow plant. “In honor of the renewed and revised treaty of Konoha and Suna, take this. It’s the child of one of my own cross-breeds. Maybe you’ll find use for it.”

Sakura takes it gingerly, eyeing it suspiciously. “What does it do?”

Chiyo just cackles. “That’s part of the process. You need to find out for yourself. I hope to one day see the effects of the poison you make in person. Make sure you seal it in a scroll before you travel; it can be…dangerous otherwise.”
“It’s time for a new mission!” Naruto grumbles, slurping up his sixth bowl of noodles.

Sakura rolls her eyes, steadily working her way through her fourth as Sasuke attempts to catch up to Naruto. “It’s been two days since we got back to Konoha, Naruto.” Sakura has given Ino the poisonous plant to her open glee. They plan to start testing in a few days after some more research. Patience is necessary for the study of poison. “We were there for three and a half weeks!”

“Chill out Naruto,” Sasuke chimes in, looking rather ill deep into his fifth bowl. “Nii-san only just got back from a mission in Iwa. He promised to train with us tomorrow morning.”

Sakura snorts as Ashura and Indra begin placing bets on when Sasuke will get sick. Sakura’s bet is five and a half in.

“But I’m bored!” Naruto whines, eagerly accepting the seventh bowl of ramen that Teuchi passes to him.

“Good news Naruto!” a voice exclaims.

The trio whirls around to catch sight of their sensei. “Baka-sensei!” Naruto greets with surprise.

Kakashi sighs. “Hello my lovely brats. The Hokage has a mission for us. Meet me at the tower.”

He disappears in a flash of scattering leaves.

The group exchanges looks with exaggerated groans. “Let’s go,” Sakura says, hopping to her feet and looking to Sasuke.

They nod with determination, grabbing Naruto by the collar and working to pull him away from Ichiraku’s.

“Just one more bowl!” Naruto cries.

“You’re the one who asked for the mission,” Sakura sings.

“This is your punishment,” Sasuke rejoins.

Ashura is howling at their antics from behind Naruto and Indra is smirking with a wry shake of his head.

Sakura grins.

These are the moments to remember.

“Our mission is to what?” Sakura inquires, unsure if she has heard right.

“Your mission is to track down Tsunade-hime,” Hokage-sama responds calmly, smirking at Sakura’s incredulity.

“A princess?” Naruto exclaims. “Hell yeah! It’s about time!”
“Naruto,” Sasuke growls, flush lighting up his neck and ears in secondhand embarrassment. “Don’t you ever read?”

“Just those journals Sakura gave me,” he replies. “Why?”

“Tsunade isn’t technically a princess,” Sakura explains patiently. “She’s the granddaughter of the first Hokage, the grandniece of the second Hokage, and one of the Sannin to boot.” At Naruto’s blank look, she sighs. “Like Jiraiya-sama?”

“That pervert!” Naruto shakes his head, crossing his arms. “She probably isn’t that great.”

“She revolutionized medical ninjutsu,” Sakura says drily.

“Well, whatever!” Naruto replies. “What’s so important about her, old man?”

Hiruzen, who had been regarding the team with a look of fondness, hesitates. “She will be my successor.”

Even Kakashi startles at this statement.

“Why Hokage-sama?” Sakura asks, flabbergasted by the announcement. “You’re still healthy and able.”

He smiles a little sadly and suddenly looks ancient. “The position of Hokage is…a momentous undertaking. I never planned to stay in office to this age. Things…change however.” His eyes are shadowed and Sakura thinks of the Kyuubi attack and the death of the Yondaime. “It is time. I would like to travel once more before I am incapable.”

Team Seven exchanges solemn looks.

“Your mission is to find Tsunade-hime and convince her to come back to Konoha,” the Hokage says. “This is a B-ranked mission with an unlimited time limit. I’ll be sending along… reinforcement.” He stares at Naruto steadily as he says this and Sakura wonders to whom he is referring.

“Why us?” Sasuke asks hesitantly. “Tsunade-hime left the village and vowed never to return. How are we supposed to bring her back?”

The Hokage assesses all four members individually with a mysteriously smile. “Each of you possesses a talent that I think will remind Tsunade-hime of her love of Konoha.”

Naruto is uncharacteristically subdued as they leave the office. Kakashi has gone off to pack and visit the memorial but Sakura and Sasuke trade looks before Sakura asks, “What’s wrong Naruto?”

He is silent for a long time. “Being Hokage…it seems lonely.”

“Hokage-sama has lost many of his comrades,” Sakura soothes. “He has shouldered a heavy burden alone. It is no wonder he is tired.”

“Besides,” Sasuke adds gruffly. “You’re going to have us by your side. You won’t be alone and we’ll take a share of the burden.”

“Teammates for life,” Sakura agrees firmly, linking pinkies with her teammates and shaking seven times as is their habit before every mission.

Naruto’s grin is pure sunlight and his teammates respond in kind.
Their “reinforcement” turns out to be the Sannin Jiraiya.

Their first meeting is…less than auspicious.

“Pervert!” Naruto howls, throwing himself at the Sannin who has only just greeted Sakura. “Stop staring at Sakura-chan.”

Jiraiya looks repulsed, easily fending off Naruto’s attacks. “I was just saying hello you brat! Besides, I’m not interested in a child!”

Sakura watches on in resignation as Sasuke joins the fray and Kakashi approaches the man and begins discussing the finer plot points of Jiraiya’s literature, looking as ecstatic as Sakura has ever seen him.

She rounds to her two spirit companions who are watching the events avidly. “Why do I even put up with these idiots?” she signs, exasperated.

Ashura shrugs but Indra replies, “They’d be hopeless without you.”

“Oi! Girlie! What sort of code is that?” Jiraiya inquires, stepping around her teammates and watching her with keen interest.

Sakura jumps, turning back to the man. Her team has accepted her eccentricities and no longer questions her when she uses sign language. It is uncommon to be called out on it. “It’s sign language.”

“It’s nothing like what we have,” Jiraiya murmurs, contemplatively. “It seems much more complicated.”

“Sakura-chan is interested in the Warring Eras!” Naruto declares, hooking an arm over her shoulder.


Jiraiya watches them with sad fondness. “Do you use it for anything?”

Sakura shrugs. “I like to practice to keep my skills up. My teammates have a rudimentary understanding of the signs so we can use it in battle.”

“Smart,” Jiraiya murmurs. “Would you teach me?”

“No way, pervert!” Naruto yells. “It’s our secret language and I don’t want you around Sakura-chan!”

Sakura sighs, pulling her still screaming teammate toward the gates of Konoha and exchanging amused looks with the spirits that flank her.

Some things never change.
They encounter Tsunade-hime on the outskirts of a small village.

They have been traveling for nearly a month around the Land of Fire, stopping in any town with a gambling house. Tsunade-hime’s vice is perhaps Konoha’s worst kept secret. They find her in a tavern, involved in some sort of gambling game.

A lithe dark haired woman stands behind her holding a pig and appears to be begging for the woman to stop the game.

Sakura glances to Ashura and Indra, looking a bit lost.

“She’s given into her vices,” Indra signs, looking disgruntled. “What a disappointment.”

Sakura shakes her head slightly as Naruto, lacking in all subtlety, approaches her, face red with anger. Jiraiya doesn’t stop him and Sakura is more than slightly curious as to why.

“Hey!” Naruto exclaims, breaking up their match. “Old lady!”

“What did you call me?” the woman hisses in response, whirling to face him.

She is gorgeous, with large brown eyes, cascading blonde hair, and a figure made entirely of slopes and curves. She looks too young to be Jiraiya’s former teammate.

Her gaze flickers over Naruto’s headband before going to Jiraiya and the rest of Team Seven.

She scowls. “Give me five more minutes to finish out this game.”

Jiraiya sighs, stepping forward to collect Naruto. “We’ll wait outside.” As they exit the tavern, he says, “She won’t win. She rarely does.”

They meander around in the alley out back before Sasuke asks what they are all thinking, “Will she actually come?”

“I keep my promises,” a voice replies. They all turn, catching sight of Tsunade, her attendant, and their pig. “Unlike some people.”

The comment is pointed and Sakura notices Jiraiya’s near imperceptible flinch.

“Tsunade, we’re here to take you home,” Jiraiya states.

Tsunade scoffs, “What, no pleasantries? I haven’t seen you in years Jiraiya but you seem much the same.”

“It’s good to see you,” he tells her, eyes impossibly soft. There is palpable history here and Sakura knows its tragic story well already. “Hokage-sama has summoned you back to Konoha. It is time to take your place, princess.”

“And what place might that be?”

“Your birthright,” Jiraiya replies. “Sarutobi-sama has named you his successor. You are the next Hokage.”

Tsunade laughs and it is bitter and fragile like a fallen autumn leaf. “Birthright? Damn you Jiraiya. You know whose birthright it truly was! I will never return to that village.”

“How can you say that?” Naruto demands. “To be Hokage…it’s an honor!”
“Don’t make me laugh kid. I owe Konoha no fealty.” Her eyes are hard and flinty. “It’s done nothing for me.”

“Konoha is your home,” Sasuke butts in, eyes Sharingan bright with anger. “It’s not about what your nation does for you but what you do for it! Konoha raised you!” He vibrates with a deep-set patriotism. “Konoha is your everything.”

“The people of Konoha are your family,” Naruto adds. “For better or for worse. The old man needs you now.”

“Come home Tsunade-hime,” Kakashi states, appealing to her sense of duty as a doctor and medic. “Your presence…after this last attack we need someone of your medical expertise in the village.”

Tsunade eyes them all, eyes alighting on the lone female of the group. “And what say you pinkie? Huh? Got some sentimental words of wisdom and misguided nationalism to shove down my throat?”

Sakura shrugs uncomfortably. “I have heard legends of you growing up and looked up to you as a capable and powerful shinobi…but now…” she trails off, not wanting to continue.

“Now what?” Tsunade demands, a flush of anger riding high on her cheeks as this slip of a girl dares to look down on her. “Spit it out girlie!”

“Now I see you are a disgrace,” Sakura replies, cold fury in her eyes. “You have abandoned your country, abandoned your people, and abandoned your pride as a shinobi. You are embroiled in your vices.”

Tsunade stares her down. “I have abandoned nothing little girl. They abandoned me. Now I travel and heal where I go.”

“That is commendable,” Sakura says with a nod. “You still run away though from the nation that raised and trained you. Konoha owes you nothing but you owe Konoha everything.”

“Your frenzied nationalism will be the end of you,” Tsunade predicts.

“Don’t talk to Sakura-chan that way!” Naruto springs to her defense. “I’m going to be Hokage one day and Sakura-chan and Sasuke-teme are going to be my right hands!”

“You can’t have two right hands,” Sasuke grouses but he stands proud and stout by his friend.

“You? Hokage?” Tsunade laughs, long and hard. “That would be something now wouldn’t it?”

“Don’t doubt the idiot. He may be stupid but he has us,” Sasuke says confidently.

“Naruto’s going to be Hokage, no doubt about it,” Sakura agrees as the two flank their blond teammate.

Tsunade eyes them shrewdly. “Want to make a bet?”

“What kind of bet?” Naruto asks.

“If you, blondie, learn a new technique by the end of the week, I’ll give you this crystal.” She shows them the crystal necklace around her neck. “If you lose, you give me all the money you have on you.” She looks them over. “All three of you.”

“You’re on!” Naruto crows. “But why would I want a stupid—?”
Jiraiya places a hand over the boy’s mouth, pulling him back. “What technique do you want him to learn?”


Naruto does not learn the technique by the end of the week. Sakura is farther along in learning the technique but unsuccessful as well. They track down Tsunade on a binge in another shabby tavern.

“Didn’t manage it did you?” she taunts Naruto.

“Neither of us did,” Sakura replies, an arm around Naruto in comfort.

“You’re a Wind type too pinkie?”

“Not exactly,” Sakura responds but doesn’t expand.

She raises a sardonic brow and raises a glass. “Here’s to me, winning a bet. Fork over the cash.”

The children grumble but, a bet is a bet. They hand over their cash, sullenly staring at the older woman.

“Tsunade,” her assistant says warningly.

“Hush Shizune,” Tsunade replies.

“I beg you to reconsider Tsunade-hime,” Jiraiya implores. “Konoha needs you. Do you think they would want to see you like this Naw—“

“Hush,” Tsunade repeats, slamming down her glass and storming out of the building.

There are large cracks left in the table from her departure. Jiraiya sighs and heads over to the bartender to pay for the damages. Kakashi trails behind his idol and the genin exchange looks as Shizune hustles over to apologize.

Team Seven follows in Tsunade’s footsteps, unsurprised to find her on a bench outside. They stand around her, silent for a long while until Sakura finally says, “You were in the Second Shinobi World War, were you not?”

Tsunade nods wearily, fight draining from her. “What’s it to you kid?”

“I’ve studied the Warring Eras… the Second War… it was one of the worst,” Sakura states, thinking back to her readings. “It consisted of guerilla warfare and the fatality rates were high. Children… children were one of the major commodities of the war. They were shipped out as fodder.”

Tsunade glances up at her, eyes red but not teary. “You know more than the average Academy student.”

“She’s obsessed,” Sasuke chimes in.

Sakura rolls her eyes at her teammate. “It’s important to understand the sacrifices made to make Konoha what it is today. One day, those sacrifices won’t be necessary. This is our dream. Naruto will be the Hokage to instill peace throughout Konoha.” Ashura and Indra are nodding in satisfaction in the background. “This is the Will of Fire and our personal nindo.”
Tsunade watches these three disparate children, from very different backgrounds and very different personalities. They are a united front and, for a moment, she sees aspects of Nawaki and Dan in each of them.

Tsunade exhales heavily, leaping to her feet, deceptively spry for how much she has been drinking. She ignores their surprised looks as she stretches. “Well, it’s time to round everyone up.”

“Why?” Sasuke asks, cautiously optimistic.

Tsunade smirks, a crimson slash full of promise. “We’re going home. It’s time to return to Konoha.”

The moment they return to the village Sakura goes apartment hunting.

She wraps an arm around Naruto’s shoulders and pulls him along after Sasuke returns home to see his family. Indra makes a face at her as he follows grudgingly and she can only smile sympathetically.

“What’s going on, Sakura-chan?” he asks, bright eyes clouded with confusion.

“We’re getting an apartment.”

“I already have one,” Naruto replies.

“We’re getting one…” she hesitates. “Together, if that’s alright by you.”

Naruto’s face splits with a wide grin as he throws himself around her, clinging to her tightly. “Alright? This is the best thing ever!”

Sakura smiles in return, wobbling slightly as she holds him in return, carefully making sure that he doesn’t get caught on her hair accessories. “Awesome. I have meetings set up with a few places that look promising.”

Ashura is watching them with gentle delight as the duo head off on their hunt.

They eventually decide on a pleasant apartment near the Hokage monuments with three bedrooms, one and a half bathrooms, a full kitchen, and an open living room. The rent is a little expensive but the Hokage gives her a little extra money for the “guardianship” of Naruto.

Their decorations are a mismatch thanks with the help of their friends: numerous plants (Ino and Gaara), posters of legendary shinobi (Kiba and Tenten), board games (Shikamaru), a full fridge (Choji), and nice furniture (Sasuke and his family). Team Seven spends a joyful day painting the apartment in the colors of the sunset with Ashura adding his opinions in the background as Indra tries to direct Sakura.

Naruto moves into the room facing the Hokage monument and Sakura into the room toward the park.

They leave the guest bedroom rather bare and make no comments as it slowly fills with Uchiha-related items and wares like uchiwa fans, fire-resistant sheets, and posters of the Konoha police force. Sakura merely ensures that there is always a bountiful supply of tomatoes in the kitchen.

When Sasuke emerges from the guest bedroom one sleepy Saturday, hair in disarray and clothes
crumpled, Naruto hands him a skillet and some eggs before he says, “You’ve got to pay your share, teme.”

Sasuke bristles, flushes, and finally nods in grudging gratitude before setting about making a traditional breakfast.

(It is delicious and Sasuke is nominated the official cook of the house.)

Technically, Sasuke still lives in the Uchiha compound but every other night is spent at Team Seven’s apartment and he is always home to make them breakfast.

Mikoto is, not so secretly, a fan of their decision and invites them over to dinner frequently. She makes a concentrated effort to bring them a basket full of food every fortnight. Between Mikoto and Choji, their pantries are constantly stocked and the trio tries out all new recipes.

Kakashi-sensei stops by at random intervals, sometimes sleeping on their couch for days at a time, sometimes only grabbing a tomato and leaving. Sakura, Sasuke, and Naruto recognize the loneliness for what it is and leave out blankets and pillows in the living room.

Ino is the first to comment on her jealousy of their set-up.

She and Sakura are lying out on Sakura’s bed, discussing the spike of D- and C-ranked missions they have received when Ino suddenly remarks, “It must be nice.”

“What is?” Sakura asks, turning to her friend.

“Living with your team,” Ino sighs. “Don’t get me wrong, I love my parents, you know I do, but I think it’d be nice to stay with Shikamaru and Choji.”

Sakura thinks of Naruto’s smelly socks, Sasuke’s terribly off-key singing, Ashura’s horrible jokes, and Indra’s morning temper. She also thinks of late nights full of giggling, mornings of meditation and delicious breakfast, and days filled with talk ranging over all sorts of topics both inane and serious.

She grins. “Yeah, it’s pretty great.” Ino pouts until Sakura shoves her with her foot. “Why don’t you just get an apartment with them? I know you guys are the clan heirs and all but all of your parents are very relaxed about ‘propriety’ and what not.”

Ino looks contemplative. “The fact that the Uchiha are good with Sasuke pretty much living here does give me a good chance.”

Sakura snorts. “That’s because of Itachi. He…I think he terrorized the clan elders into being good with it. Mikoto-san was already on board. Besides, Sasuke is, as he likes to call himself, ‘the spare.’ Between that and Itachi…the elders didn’t stand a chance.” She smiles slyly. “I believe there is another apartment open on this floor.”

Ino’s returning grin is beautiful.

Team Ten starts a trend that spreads rapidly.

Sakura helps Kiba bemusedly as they drag in Akamaru’s bedding into Team Eight’s new apartment. Tsume and Hana are there as well, directing the movement of furniture and laughing at
Kiba’s clumsiness.

Sasuke is moving Shino’s plants carefully and Hinata is being assisted by Shikamaru in carrying a long couch.

“Is this truly alright?” Sakura inquires of Shino. “You and Hinata are both clan heirs.”

Shino regards her for a moment. “You need not worry Sakura-san. My parents are very… accommodating.” His tone takes on a touch of amusement. “Why? Because they are happy that I have made friends.”

Sakura smiles and places a hand on his arm. “Of course you have friends.” She turns to survey Hinata. “And Hinata? I can’t imagine her father is okay with this.”

After all, Hinata is from one of the four oldest clans of Konoha. The Aburame and Akimichi are as well, but they do not cling to the airs that the Uchiha and Hyuuga put on. The Akimichi are very open, free, and close to civilian groups. The Aburame, while secretive, care little for the political processes and machinations of Konoha. Sasuke has been allowed to move out because he is not the Uchiha heir.

“She has stepped down from the position of heir,” Shino murmurs.

“What?” Sakura hisses. “Why would she do that? She and Neji are on speaking terms now. She’s proven herself!”

Shino shrugs lithely with a slight smile. “She wilted under the overbearing of her family. Kurenai-sensei and Hokage-sama helped her in the progress of leaving so she didn’t have to be sealed. It was out of the clan head’s hands.”

Sakura grimaces. “Those seals…they’re barbaric.”

Shino nods. “I believe Hiashi-sama agrees as well. He let Hinata go without much of a fight. I think it was his gift to her.”

Sakura is still contemplative, looking over all of her friends. All of them are from ninja clans. She has been envious of them for the support they received from their family members. Even before their deaths, her parents were hesitant about her chosen career and they certainly never understood her decision. Her friends were gifted with skills and resources beyond Sakura’s reach just because of where they were born.

Sakura understands now, the struggles that clan children face. There is greater restriction on them and they face pressure to match the legacy of those clansmen who came before them. Sakura knows that she has been given a great gift in being a first generational ninja.

“She may be disowned, but we’re her family now,” Sakura states vehemently, making her way over to her friend with Shino in tow.

There is a slight tension when Team Gai brings their boxes onto their floor and moves in down the hall from Team Seven.

Naruto and Neji regard each other warily as Hinata looks on anxiously. Sakura looks to Tenten with a sigh as Lee and Sasuke begin bickering in their odd way.

It is Ino who breaks the tension.
She walks straight up to Neji and Naruto, throwing an arm around each of their necks. Naruto, used to her random displays of affection, is unmoved but Neji is stiff as a board. Sakura notices with delight that his ears turn a bright red.

“Alright guys, we’re all friends here.” Ino turns her serious gaze on each of them. Both shiver, knowing her kekkei genkai. “Keep the Will of Fire in mind.”

Ino slaps them both on the back and steps around to Hinata, wrapping an arm around her hip and leading her to Tenten’s practical arsenal of weapons. It is more than enough to break the tension and soon they are all laughing at each other and goofing around.

They are joyful and happy, sparring together and participating in all sorts of mock-battles with each other. Sometimes they switch off senseis for spars and Sakura’s mind has never been so keen.

It is on one such morning where Team Seven is scheduled to spar with Gai-sensei that Itachi shows up in their living room, looking pristine and fresh.

“Itachi-nii!” Sasuke exclaims, giving his brother an enthusiastic hug before returning to cooking. “What brings you here this morning?”

He smirks and Sakura wonders what sort of game he’s playing. Itachi, while the most gentle and pacifistic boy she knows, has a mischievous streak a mile wide and his sense of humor is…odd.

“Just finishing up some business,” he states, brandishing a bundle of official looking documents.

“Itachi,” Sakura says warningly.

He laughs, just as Naruto emerges in bright orange boxers and nothing else. “I-Itachi!” Naruto yelps, running back into his room. “What are you doing here?”

“You’re looking at your new landlord,” Itachi informs, looking like the cat that got the canary and the cream.

Sakura snorts. “You’re joking.”

“Nope!” he replies, passing her the documents. His smile falls into a more serious look. “From this moment on, you and your fellow genin, you and your fellow genin,” He eyes Sakura’s flak jacket, “and chunin will no longer be paying rent.”

Sasuke and Sakura exchange wide-eyed looks.


Sasuke nods, passing him an omelet.

Naruto reemerges, fully dressed and looking slightly less unkempt. “What’s the catch?”

Sasuke and Sakura round on Itachi again, looking speculative. There is always a catch.

Itachi grins and Sakura feels slightly terrified. “Expect a new neighbor. Shisui is moving in!”

Team Seven groans collectively and, as Sakura watches the spirits gripe about the boisterous Uchiha, she knows her home life has gotten a lot more eventful.
Ashura and Indra enjoy the new arrangement greatly. They generally spend most of their time at home in her room or in the living area. It is on one of those evenings, in the wee hours between night and day, that Sakura poses a question.

The trio is lounging in Sakura’s room as Sakura reads through some scrolls Sarutobi-sama recently lent her on Summoning.

“Do…did you guys have Summons?” she asks, glancing at her two friends.

They both nod.

“What were they?”

“I had a contract with the cats,” Indra states.

“The Uchiha has the contract now,” Sakura muses, smirking as Indra grunts. “Don’t be jealous; it isn’t becoming.”

“Bears,” Ashura adds. “I had bears.”

Sakura furrows her brow in thought. “I haven’t heard of a Summoning contract with bears.”

Ashura flushes as Indra snorts. “That’s because the idiot hid it so no one could find it,” Indra mutters. “And you call me possessive.”

Sakura eyes Ashura incredulously. “You hid the scroll.”

“I was young,” Ashura defends.

Sakura laughs and lies back on her bed.

“Hey, Sakura, maybe you can get the contract,” Ashura tells her.

“Me?” she asks, taken aback.

“Sure,” he says with a shrug. “They’re all about honor and stuff. They’d love you.”

“Where’s the contract?” she asks, feeling interest thrum in her veins.

“Can you grab a map? The names have changed.”

Sakura pulls out a map and the three pour over it with interest. They determine that Ashura left the Summoning scroll in the Land of Tea.

Sakura approaches the Hokage the next day requesting a solo mission to the Land of Tea. Tsunade levels her with a stare.

“Why would you want to do that?” she asks.

“I came across an obscure text on the Warring Eras. I think that there is a Summoning scroll that was hidden in a small village on the edge of the Land of Tea. I’d like to try to recover it,” Sakura says.

Tsunade snorts. “I was told that you were interested in the Warring Eras, but this is more of an obsession. You want to go to the Land of Tea based on a hunch?”
Sakura shrugs. “It’s worth a shot.”

Tsunade regards her with hard hazel eyes. “Very well. Know that I do this only based on the recommendation of Sarutobi-sensei. You are hereby assigned a C-ranked solo mission to the Land of Tea. Time limit is two weeks. Bring me back three different types of sake.” She sighs, rubbing her temples. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Sakura completes the mission in less than a week, returning with four crates of exotic sake and an ancient scroll. She drops the sake off with Tsunade, gratefully accepting her payment before eagerly heading home and greeting her friends.

That evening, she, Ashura, and Indra sit in a circle as she carefully bites her thumb and writes her name in blood. The only other name on the scroll is Ashura’s. She glances at the two spirits before pressing her thumb down at the end. They exchange weary glances as nothing happens.

Suddenly, a small Andean bear pops into existence. His fur is a deep purple with pale lilac fur around the face. He is tiny, perhaps three times the size of Sakura’s fist.

“Greetings, Summoner,” he says in a high pitched voice. “This one is known as Terasu-sama. To whom am I speaking?”

Sakura watches the polite, formal Summon with interest. “I am Haruno Sakura,” she greets with a slight, formal bow, hands at her hips. “I am pleased to meet you Terasu-sama.”

The bear glances around and sniffs the air, brown eyes widening as he catches sight of a spirit. “Ashura-sama!” he greets, ducking his head. “We thought you dead!”

“You can see him?” Sakura asks.

“Of course,” the bear says snootily. “He is our Summoner.”

“Can you hear me?” Ashura asks.

“Yes,” the bear replies.

“Can you see Indra?” Sakura inquires, glancing at the ignored, disgruntled spirit.

“Ashura-sama’s brother? No,” Terasu scoffs. “He is less worthy than Ashura-sama in any case.”

Sakura lifts a hand to her face to hide her laughter as Indra turns away in disgust. “Stupid bears,” he murmurs.

“Let us return to the business at hand,” Terasu states. “Do you vouch for this child, Ashura-sama?”

Ashura nods without hesitation. “She will be a good Summoner to you all.”

Terasu nods once before bowing to Sakura. “My superiors will be so pleased to be involved in Summoning again. It has…been a while.”

He disappears in a billow of pink smoke.

“That was…interesting,” Sakura comments.

“They’re from a different time!” Ashura protests. “They may seem flamboyant now but you should have seen Indra with his cats. The most uppity creatures I’ve ever seen.” He smirks. “Well, aside from Indra.”
Sakura sighs as the brothers begin a scuffle. She stares down at the scroll in thought, wondering what the other Summons will be like.

Sarutobi-sama has taken her on as an apprentice.

In some ways, it is not unexpected. She has been receiving advice and on seldom occasion, physical training since before being placed in a team. Now that the role of Hokage has been passed to another, Sarutobi-sama has more time to train her. Most of the time, their training consists of Sarutobi-sama asking a complicated question of her as they meditate side by side. He does not usually expect a concrete answer but he demands a thoughtful one.

It is during one of these sessions that he asks, “Have you considered apprenticeship?”

Sakura shrugs, relaxing into a meditative state beside the former Hokage. “Should I? One-on-one apprenticeships usually precipitate wartimes, at least in Konoha.”

He turns to her seriously. “And you do not think we are on the brink of war?”

“Oto has made a move on us…if we do not retaliate we will seem weak and open to attack from other nations…” Sakura pauses. “Is this why you renewed the treaty with Suna? And why you brought Tsunade-hime in to take your place?”

He chuckles. “You are perceptive, Sakura-chan. This war…there are no predecessors quite like it. Oto is not a nation in the same way that others are; it is nomadic. Orochimaru has strongholds in nearly all of the nations. Suna has agreed to purge Oto-nin found in Suna with prejudice, but the other nations…” He smiles wryly. “Most are unopen to Konoha crossing their borders.”

Sakura nods. “Understandably.”

“Tsunade-hime, much like myself, is interested in forging relationships with the other nations so we may send in elite teams in and flush out Oto.” His mouth firms but his eyes are sad. “It is time for Orochimaru to pay for his crimes.”

Sakura smiles empathetically, knowing that he was once the man’s teacher. She lays a gentle hand on his arm. “Count me in, Sarutobi-sama.”

Sarutobi-sama grins. “Call me Sarutobi-sensei.”

Sakura is introduced to her team replacement the next day. Sarutobi-sensei has explained the boy’s origin as a Root member and Sakura is prepared when the boy appears before her. He stands on the rooftop in front of her, lithe, pale, and dark haired.

Sakura leaps up to join him, seating herself in front of him.


“I know,” he replies blandly.

There is an uncomfortable pause before Sakura clears her throat. “And you are Sai.”
He tilts his head, clutching the journal in his hands. Sakura feels a surge of sympathy for the boy just as he says, “I am going to call you ‘Ugly.’”

Sakura’s smile falls and she regards him, unamused as she remembers the jeers and taunts of children long ago. “And what warrants that decision?”

“Friends are supposed to have nicknames,” he responds, watching her awkwardly.

Sakura snorts. “If you keep up nicknames like that, you’re going to have very few friends.” She frowns as his hands clench the book tighter, his false smile growing. “It’s alright. You can call me whatever you please.”

His smile softens slightly and they regard each other in contemplation. Sakura knows that Root conditions its soldiers to suppress their emotions, but this boy seems different. Though he seems completely disconnected from what he feels, he is still feeling. He also seems to care about her opinion of him. Sakura cannot help but wonder why.

“You’ll take care of my teammates won’t you?” she implores.


Sakura hopes that Naruto and Sasuke’s light will help this boy become more in touch with his emotions. If anyone can inspire emotions, both good and bad, her boys can.

So Sakura chuckles, patting Sai’s hand and ignoring his responding flinch. “You’re cute, Sai-chan. My teammates are in your care.”

Sakura says her goodbyes to Indra and Ashura late at night. She has spent the day packing her bags, good-naturedly fending off her friends who have all been sticking closer to her since news of her apprenticeship has been revealed. Ino and Naruto are well-nigh clinging to her while the rest of her friends hover nearby.

Itachi, Mikoto, and Shisui have gifted her with some very nice seals to keep all of her items in. The Rookies have given her a photograph of the group of them soon after Team Gai moved in. They have just completed a free-for-all spar and are lying in various positions of exhaustion on a smoking, crater-filled training field. Asuma-sensei is the one who snapped the picture after he came across the children.

Sakura is moved nearly to tears and grins as they also give her blank, high-grade paper tags and chakra enhanced kunai and senbon.

Sakura finishes sealing her necessities into a shoulder pack and falls back on her bed with a sad smile. Ashura and Indra sit on the edge of the bed, regarding her with an ageless sorrow.

“It was going to happen at some point wasn’t it?” she signs.

“But, but Sakura-chan!” Ashura replies. “You’re our best friend!”

“It is far too soon,” Indra adds, red eyes solemn.

Sakura shrugs helplessly. “I want to make a difference in this upcoming war. Sarutobi-sensei and I will hopefully minimize the damages in the fallout. Hopefully we can win this war before it ever
really begins.”

“We aren’t angry with you,” Indra says. “Just the situation. I’ll be stuck with this idiot for the entirety of your time away.”

“You two need some time to repair your relationship anyway,” Sakura says sternly. “I’m not your mediator. Don’t think that I haven’t noticed that you two hardly speak outside of conversations with me.”

Both shift uncomfortably.

“When did you notice?” Ashura finally asks.

“Long before you guys realized I could see you,” Sakura replies.

Sakura watches in amusement as these two figures of legends squirm beneath her gaze.

“And you said nothing?” Indra inquires.

“I thought it would heal naturally, but now…well, I’m leaving. Both Sasuke and Naruto will be training in the village. Sasuke is training under Shisui and Naruto with Jiraiya. You two will have no one else to talk to but each other. Do it!” They eye each other with distaste. “You are brothers, both in blood and in bond. You lost yourselves in pride and killed each other. Please…don’t repeat the mistakes of your lifetime.”

They turn their gazes to her after a long moment, eyes soft.

“You’re remarkable,” Indra signs.

“We’ll miss you, a lot. Promise you’ll return,” Ashura says.

“As long as the two of you try to repair your relationship,” Sakura replies with a smile.

This departure is sad and heartbreaking, but something at least something good is coming of it for her spirit friends.

“I’ll try to…figure out your situation while traveling. Sarutobi-sensei is quite possibly the most knowledgeable of all shinobi.”

They smile at her, grateful in a way that breaks her heart to pieces.

They say their goodbyes at the gates.

All of her friends are there to see her off. Her neighboring genin and chunin, her multiple senseis, and a handful of Uchiha crowd around her and say their final farewells. Sakura is pulled hither and thither in a sea of hugs, and Sakura is briefly thankful that she forewent her hair accessories this morning for this very reason.

Finally, Sarutobi-sensei places a gentle but firm hand on her shoulder, nodding slightly.

Sakura sighs but her lips spread in a grin as she eyes the people around her. These people are her family; a family that she herself has chosen.
“I’ll be back,” she promises, though it may be a hefty promise to keep.

She sets off with her teacher, smiling softly as she feels the spirits flanking her. The four walk together for a ways until Ashura and Indra reach their limits.

Sakura briefly feels them both brush a hand over hers and she cannot help but wonder how they can interact with her physically. Perhaps it is merely a phantom sensation of her mind, fabricating a tactile experience.

Sakura smiles and signs, “Goodbye.”

Sarutobi-sensei is kind enough to ignore the tears that trickle down her face.

Their first stop is Kiri. They have been traveling for two weeks and are approaching the border of the Land of Water. The Yondaime Mizukage passed away mysteriously prior to the Konoha Crush. The era of the Bloody Mist is finally over, but no one knows what is to follow.

“Who is the new Mizukage?” Sakura asks, adjusting her pack as they leap from branch to branch.

“There is not one yet,” Sarutobi responds. “We’ll be stopping in Kiri just in time to see the inauguration of the Godaime Mizukage.” He grins mischievously. “We’re to be Konoha’s representatives.”

Sakura shakes her head slightly. “You are a bad, bad man.”

“We have intel that indicates that the Yondaime’s passing was…less than peaceful,” Sarutobi states.

Sakura’s brow furrows. “You think that there was a coup?”

“We know there was a coup. No doubt the rebellion’s leader will become the Godaime Mizukage. Our job is to see what the intentions of this rebellion are. The Bloody Mist was an age of tyranny. Konoha was not in a good place to assist the citizens, though Team Seven helped out a smaller village.” He eyes her wryly. “This time around, we want to assist.”

“To create a treaty?” she asks.

“Perceptive,” he chuckles. “And why are we creating this treaty?”

“To strengthen Konoha and deepen her resources.” Sakura’s eyes are lightning and stone; lethal and unmoving. “We’re going to war.”

He hums in agreement. “Let’s stop for the night. I’ve a gift for you.”

Sakura crouches in her tree, turning to stare at her teacher incredulously. “When did you have time to get me a gift?”

He smiles. “I had it commissioned before I sent Team Seven after Tsunade-hime. Forgive me, it was presumptuous, but I was hoping you would be my student. My Summon let me know it was completed today.”

Sakura grins. “It was a calculated risk but I graciously accept your offer of gifts.”
“Cheeky,” he mutters. “Go secure the perimeter.”

By the time she has finished setting traps and caught a few rabbits, there is a roaring fire that crackles merrily. Sakura pulls her pack close and pulls out a scroll sealed to the brim with spices and seasonings. She has Choji and his mother to thank for that. She skins and sets the rabbits on splits after rubbing them down with seasoning.

She places her chin in her hands and stares up at her teacher pleadingly. “So, presents?”

He laughs and pulls out a scroll of his own. “Here.”

She takes the scroll eagerly, unsealing it with anticipation. She pulls out a long wooden weapon topped with a short, brutally sharp blade. The polearm is absolutely gorgeous, made of teak and a luminous metal that Sakura has never seen before.

“This is a naginata, right?” Sakura asks, standing and hefting the weapon. She likes the weight and feel of it in her hands.

“Correct,” Sarutobi replies. “More than just that, the metal this is made of is chakra-infused and compatible. It is stronger than all known other metals and you can channel your chakra directly into it and lengthen your range and lethality.”

Sakura lets out a low whistle of appreciation as Inner Sakura comments, Badass!

“It will take some time and training to put your chakra into the weapon but your fine-tuned chakra control makes it the one of the best weapon choices for you,” Sarutobi explains.

“I cannot thank you enough,” Sakura says softly. “This is fantastic.”

He chuckles. “Thank you for allowing me to be a sensei again. It is…nice to get back to my roots. Besides, we’re heading to Kiri; some of the most legendary weapon-using ninja are from Kiri.”

They arrive in Kirigakure no Sato a few days prior to the inauguration ceremony. It has been nearly a nearly a month since they set out but they have kept a slower pace so Sakura can train with the naginata. It is still rather large and unwieldy in hands used to kunai and senbon but she is adapting.

The duo shows the guards their passports. Sakura notes that her teacher receives a lot of attention from the guardsmen. After all, he is a “God of Shinobi.”

True to its name, the village is overcast with mist and seems much drearier than the sunny Konoha. Once again, Sakura is thankful for her nation of birth. There is no place she’d rather be. Still, there is lush vegetation growing on the tops of large, spiraling towers and Sakura cannot keep from gaping.

Sarutobi chuckles. “It is a lot different, is it not?”

Sakura flushes. “It…isn’t what I expected.”

“Well, your only experience with the Land of Water has been a small village that was beleaguered and beggared long before you arrived. The Yondaime Mizukage and I may have disagreed on many things, but he certainly knew how to care for his village.”

Sakura nods distractedly, still taking in the sights of Kiri. It is vastly different from both Konoha
“We’ll check into our hotel and then I’ll give you freedom for the afternoon,” Sarutobi offers generously, amused by her enchantment with this new village. “I have some…friends I need to meet.”

“Shouldn’t I be meeting with them too?” Sakura asks, eyebrow raised. She knows that Sarutobi-sensei has an extensive spy network through all the nations, cultivated by himself and Jiraiya.

“All in good time, my dear,” he replies airily. “For this afternoon, enjoy yourself and visit the museum of artifacts. There are some interesting weapons there that may draw your interest.”

“You’ve been to Kiri before?” Sakura inquires, surprised. Tensions have been high since before her time; something about a Konoha girl going missing.

“I have traveled to very many places, some under better circumstances than others,” he replies, looking distant. “In any case, let’s get settled.”

Sakura doesn’t argue and, after placing her pack and scrolls in the room, finds herself once more in the sprawling streets of Kiri. She merges with the crush of people around her, enjoying the anonymity of being in a completely new village.

With a smile on her face and a spring in her step, Sakura pulls out her map and begins meandering toward the museum. She isn’t purposeful in her mission as she stops off at different street vendors and shops along the way. It is nice to have a break. Sakura cannot remember the last free day she had so she plans to take full advantage. She purchases small trinkets for friends along the way.

Finally, Sakura stares up at an older brick building that is nearly covered in plants. Ivy crawls out of little crevices and green moss obscures most of the redness of the brick. It is a nice building, though at odds with the sleek sophistication of the others around it.

She enters, pays for a ticket, and begins exploring. Sakura is taken aback at the versatility of weapons displayed. Tenten would kill to see these displays. There are katars, polearms, kunai, axes, staffs, flails, clubs, bows, and, of course, swords. There are swords of all types and of all periods. Sakura is not surprised. After all, Kiri is best known for its swordsmen.

She is most interested in the swords and the polearms.

As she is eyeing a sword believed to be used by the first of the Swordsmen, a voice says, “I-I see you’re interested in swords.”

Sakura turns, catching sight of a boy who is around her own age. He is short, pale, and has light blue hair. His glasses rest askew on his face. He looks incredibly embarrassed and uncomfortable. He reminds her of Hinata in her Academy days and Sakura cannot help but smile.

“I am,” she replies. “Are you offering a tour?”

“C-certainly,” he states. “I’m Chōjūrō.”

“Sakura,” she introduces, offering a hand. “What do you know about these swords?”

He flushes. “Quite a bit, actually.”

As he begins his spiel, Sakura cannot help but wonder at this marvelous coincidence. She knows it is too good to be true. Her eyes narrow in assessment as she stares at her newfound companion. His
teeth are sharp and Sakura has to hide a smile.

This boy, Chōjūrō, he is one of the Seven Swordsmen.

Sakura supposes that he is her tail for her time in the village. With a shrug, she accepts it. After all, he makes for good company.

“Say, Chōjūrō, would you like to grab some dinner after this? I find that traveling really leaves me famished.”

“Make new friends this afternoon?” Sarutobi comments as she walks into the suite.

“How did you-?” Sakura cuts herself off.

Spy network.

“I let you go for one evening and you get cozy with one of the Seven Swordsmen?” Sarutobi asks with a laugh.

“He approached me,” Sakura replies. “He’s tailing me for the Mizukage.”

“So you caught that,” he says, approval clear in his voice. “Good.”

“That was a test?”

“And you passed with flying colors,” he replies calmly. “So, did you think the Swordsman was cute?”

“Sensei!” Sakura complains.

They stand in the crowd as the Godaime Mizukage, Terumi Mei, accepts her position as the new ruler of Kiri. She is tall and made of curves with bright red hair that cascades down past her waist. She is a sultry vision and she takes the Kage hat with a satisfied and accomplished smile.

Sakura glances at her sensei, taken aback by the smile on his face.

“She will bring in a reign of peace for the Land of Water,” Sarutobi says, happiness radiating from him. “It is time for a new era.”

Sakura nods, smirking in amusement as she catches sight of Chōjūrō standing near the newly inaugurated Mizukage.

“Sarutobi-sama,” a voice chimes.

The pair turns to a tall, blue haired man in an eyepatch.

“Ao,” Sarutobi greets with a frown. “To what do we owe this…pleasure?”

“The Mizukage has summoned you to join her for dinner this evening.” Ao’s eye flickers over Sakura. He smirks, apparently finding her lacking. “Your…student is welcome to accompany you.”
Teacher and student exchange looks before Sarutobi nods graciously. “Please extend our regards to the Mizukage. We would be honored to join her for dinner.”

Ao eyes them. “Yes, you are,” he says succinctly before disappearing.

“Why do I get the feeling that there is enmity between the two of you?” Sakura inquires as they begin making their way back to the hotel.

“Because there is. Ao took something from a Konoha nin in a dishonorable manner,” Sarutobi informs her, offering her an arm. “He is a nationalist through and through and he believes Konoha to be weak.”

Sakura scoffs. “Better he underestimate us anyway.”

He laughs outright. “Right you are, Sakura-chan. Let’s get ready.”

They return to the adjoining suites allotted them and Sakura begins organizing her supplies as Sarutobi-sensei speaks with Aki, one of his monkey Summons, renowned for her skills as a spy. She is a small, orange pygmy marmoset with wide purple eyes. Her voice is deep and rasping though and Sakura smiles to herself as she allows their conversation to wash over her. Sarutobi is to act as Tsunade-hime’s mouthpiece on all of their diplomatic endeavors and he needs to remain up to date on the happenings of Konoha and the other shinobi nations. Honestly, it is probably for the best that Sarutobi is the acting diplomat and not the current Hokage.

Tsunade-hime has a very quick temper and does not yet possess the mien for subtle political maneuvering.

Sakura reseals her scrolls and steps up to the mirror, slowly unbinding her hair and brushing it out. It is long and flowing, falling a little below her hips now.

“You should try a different hairstyle tonight,” Aki suggests, watching her with luminous purple eyes through the door between the suites. “You can seduce the young Swordsman,” she cackles. “He’s one of Mei’s prized pupils.”

Sakura blushes to the roots of her hair. “What?”

“Let her be,” Sarutobi soothes, running a hand through the fur on Aki’s neck. “She’s a little young to be thinking of seduction. Still, Sakura-chan, you may enjoy trying a different hairstyle. There are more ways to hide weapons in your hair than just a braid.”

Sakura nods tentatively and finds herself at the mercy of Aki’s soft, tiny paws as she pulls her hair into a complicated hairstyle. It is soothing, having the marmoset pluck through her hair.

“How’d you learn to style hair?” Sakura asks.

“I observed,” Aki replies, small claws traveling over Sakura’s head. “Hush. Let the adults speak.”

Suitably chastened, Sakura allows herself to drift as she listens to her sensei and his Summon speak of spies and dreams of peace. She knows that she is being trusted heavily to even be present for this conversation. Sakura also understands that Aki being willing to play with her hair is another way of showing trust. She is a part of this family now and Sakura could not be happier.
“Y-you look nice,” Chōjūrō greets her, offering a hand to escort her to their table.

They are in a rather ritzy restaurant that serves all of Kiri’s most famous cuisines. It is a very formal affair but Sakura, ever practical, is still dressed in her standard ninja wear, including her chunin vest. The only difference is the intricate braids in her hair that are woven together into a high bun.

“Thanks,” she replies, following Chōjūrō to a long, low table.

The Mizukage is already seated and she invites Sarutobi to sit in the honored place on her right. Ao is on her other side and Sakura and Chōjūrō take their places at the other end of the table.

“Greetings friends,” Mei announces after everyone is seated. “I am glad all of you are here on this most auspicious of occasions. Please, enjoy this meal and celebrate the dawning of a new era with me.”

Sakura settles into her seat, listening to Chōjūrō’s suggestions of which foods to sample and which to avoid. She discreetly watches as the former Hokage and the newly inaugurated Mizukage speak in low, intense tones.

“You’re the pacifist ninja aren’t you,” a voice jeers.

Sakura, startled out of her musings, turns her gaze to Ao. “I’m sorry?”

He laughs. “You’re famous, kid. You are the ninja who refused to fight in the preliminaries of the chunin exam, are you not?”

“I am,” Sakura says. “Is there a problem with that?”

He snorts, dark eye amused. “It is just…expected of you Konoha nin.”

Sakura brushes the comment off though Chōjūrō stiffens at her side. “S-she helped to stop the invasion,” he reminds Ao.

“Perhaps she has her uses,” he says.

“Stop,” Mei commands, voice low and husky. Ao immediately goes silent. “I hope you are not insulting our guests Ao. That would be…inadvisable.”

He pales. “I apologize for any slight,” he speaks reluctantly.

“Though I do admit curiosity,” Mei murmurs, eyes half-lidded. “Why did you forfeit the match?”

“I will not harm a friend or fellow Konoha nin for sport,” Sakura replies unflinchingly, slightly bothered by all the attention.

“Well said,” the older woman replies with a smile. Sakura gets the feeling that she has just passed some sort of test. It seems Kages, both former and current, enjoy mind games. She turns to Sarutobi-sensei “I would like to extend a formal invitation to the two of you, Remain here as we discuss a peace treaty.” She raises a glass. “To new allies and better friends.”

Sakura raises her glass, locking eyes with her sensei.

She has no doubt that her skills with the naginata will improve vastly during their time in Kiri.
She is not wrong.

In the two months that they remain in Kiri hammering out the details of the treaty, Sakura has become comfortable with her naginata in spars with Chōjūrō and Ao. Ao has overcome his inherent dislike of Konoha nin for the most part. Sakura still ignores any of the slights he makes against Konoha.

When they set off from Kiri, Sakura has new techniques, friends, and weapon skills under her belt. She waves goodbye to her small group of friends at the gates, feeling something akin to déjà vu.

As Kiri disappears behind them, Sakura glances up at her teacher. “Where are we headed next?”

“Kumo,” he replies solemnly.

“Really? Tsunade-hime wants us to go there?” Tensions have been high between the two nations even before the Hyuuga Fiasco. “Why?”

“It is high time to ease the distrust between the two nations,” he states. “Our contact with the Raikage has been good so far. It is alright to be optimistic.”

Sakura shrugs but does not disagree.

At least, not aloud.

They settle for the night in a small clearing and Sakura is methodically cleaning her naginata when a small popping sound informs her of a new arrival. She turns, catching sight of one of her Summons.

“Kikyo!” she exclaims, looking down at the medium-sized sloth bear staring up at her with doleful green eyes.

“In the flesh,” she replies. “I’ve a message for you.”

Upon her journey from the village, Sakura quickly realized she could communicate with her team, friends, and Ashura through Kikyo. Kikyo takes messages twice a week, once from Sakura to her friends and once from her friends to Sakura. It may not be much, but Sakura treasures each and every message.

Sakura grins, pulling the bear into her lap. Of the Summons she has met thus far, Kikyo is the least formal and most relaxed. She enjoys being cuddled while giving her reports, even if her fellow Summons think it “unbecoming” for a bear of her stature. “Go ahead, Kikyo,” she says as she rubs the bear behind her ears.

“Ashura. The message is as follows: Team Seven is starting to adjust to your absence. The boys constantly argue but their teamwork is getting there. Everyone misses you. The Sabaku siblings visited recently on a diplomatic mission and were quite upset that you weren’t in the village. You didn’t tell them? Naughty, naughty. Tenten was taken on as the Hokage’s apprentice. She’s absolutely thrilled.”

Sakura smiles, ecstatic for her friend. Tenten’s idol has always been Tsunade-hime and Sakura is glad that she has a chance to work closely with her.

“Indra says, ‘I suck and Ashura is so much—!’ Ow! Stop hitting me Indra! I was just joking! Indra
actually says, ‘Make sure you keep meditating every morning and evening. Learn as many jutsu as you can from the nations you’re traveling to.’ Anyway, back to me now.

“We really miss you Sakura. I don’t think we realized how much we relied on you for contact until after you left. I know it’s selfish but you should come home as quickly as possible. Indra is nodding, so he definitely agrees. Anyway, you’re our best friend and we miss you. Come home soon. Oh, Team Seven is about to leave…we’ll talk to you soon. End message.”

The bear glances up at Sakura. “Would you like to send a message back now?”

Sakura shakes her head slightly, taking in a ragged breath. “No thank you, Kikyo.”

“Sakura, are you alright?” the bear asks, placing her paws around the trembling girl.

“Not really,” Sakura whispers. “Thank you for delivering the message, Kikyo. I…I will Summon you soon.”

The bear regards her sadly before disappearing. Sakura inhales sharply, trying to regulate her breathing. She misses Konoha. She wants to experiment with Ino, eat ramen with Naruto and Sasuke, play shogi with Shikamaru, recite poetry with Choji, and pester Kakashi-sensei to show his face. She wants to be able to see the Hokage monument, lingering above her solid and strong, a comforting presence everywhere she goes.

Most of all, she misses spending time with Indra and Ashura. They are her best friends, known only to her and each other. She wants to pore over ancient scrolls, speak their secret language, meditate shoulder to shoulder, hear stories of the past, and just be with her two spiritual companions. Sakura thinks she may miss them the most because they have no one else. They can only be seen by each other, their personal Summons, and her.

This is how Sarutobi-sensei finds her, curled up on herself and crying quietly.

He quickly puts the rabbits on a split over the fire before cautiously approaching her. “Sakura-chan? What’s wrong?” he asks, seating himself beside her, careful not to touch her. “Are you homesick?”

She nods miserably.

He sighs. “It has been a while since we left. Sometimes I forget how young you are. You carry yourself so well, Sakura-chan. This is the longest you’ve ever been away from the village, is it not?” She nods. “I apologize that you only have an old man to keep you company. Usually we try to have individuals take long-term missions like this with their genin team. Would you be willing to share your pain with me? I’ve been told that I am a good listener.”

Sakura glances up from her knees, eyes red-rimmed and teary. She only hesitates for a moment, taking a deep breath and saying, “I see dead people.”

Hiruzen blinks owlishly at her for a moment. “I can honestly say that I have never heard that one before.”

Sakura giggles wetly. “Well, I see two dead people actually. They’re spirits. Ōtsutsuki Ashura and Ōtsutsuki Indra to be precise.” she pauses with bated breath. For the first time she has experienced, Sarutobi-sensei is struck silent. “They…they follow Naruto and Sasuke around. We, that is, Ashura, Indra, and I, think that Naruto and Sasuke are descendants or some type of reincarnations.”

“That is…something,” he murmurs finally, leveling her with a keen stare. “This certainly explains
your interest in the Warring Eras.”

Sakura flushes. “You…you don’t think I’m crazy?”

He snorts. “I believe all ninja are at least slightly unhinged. Still, I do not believe you insane. Some of the strangest and most unbelievable occurrences are reality. We, as ninja, are able to harness and bend elements to our command. Our world is inexplicable. Your situation is not the craziest thing I have heard, though it is unexpected.”

Sakura smiles slightly. “They’re my best friends. I can see them but I cannot hear them.”

“And that’s why you learned sign language,” Hiruzen says, eyes widening in realization. “Is that also how you received your Summoning contract?”

“It was Ashura’s originally.”

“Interesting. No one else is able to see them?”

“Ashura’s Summons can see him though they cannot see Indra. The cat Summons could probably see Indra if they were ever exposed to each other,” Sakura relays. “I’ve been the only person who can see them so far. We aren’t sure why.”

Hiruzen strokes his chin, eyes far away in thought. “I am sure you already know that their father was the Ōtsutsuki Hagoromo, the Sage of Six Paths.” Sakura nods, wondering where this is leading. “He is the founder of the Will of Fire and he instigated peace through all of Lands. Perhaps…” he trails off.

“Perhaps what?” Sakura queries, desperate for answers.

“Of all the shinobi I have come across, you best embody the philosophy of the Will of Fire. You understand it in an intrinsic, instinctual way that I have never seen. Perhaps, you are able to see them because you embody the best part of their father. I don’t believe you to be his reincarnation, but an incarnation of his best ideals.” He shrugs. “I do not know, this is only a preliminary theory, but I will begin to research it.”

Sakura looks up at her teacher, wondering if this might be true. Something seems lacking

*Then again, it could be because of me, Inner Sakura comments wryly. I may not be a full “spirit,” but we are more than one person. Not going to tell the old man about me?*

Sakura closes her eyes, leaning slightly against her teacher. *Not today,* she replies wearily. *Enough secrets have been shared for now.*

Sakura runs across Hoshigaki Kisame in the most unexpected of places.

It happens like this:

Sakura and Sarutobi are traveling to Kumogakure through the mountains and make a brief stop at an onsen. Sarutobi bids Sakura farewell as he leaves to meet with Jiraiya over business. He knows better than to bring his former pupil to an onsen where the temptation would be too great.

Sakura says a quick goodbye before making a beeline to the heated pools of water. She is glad for the break. This particular onsen is small, isolated, and outdoors. Sakura is excited for a chance to
try it out but she stops in the teashop adjoining the onsen for dango before her bath.

It is here, after she places her order and looks for a place to sit, that she first lays eyes on Kisame.

He is seated alone at the corner table, sword propped up behind him. Sakura curses her lack of awareness though she can honestly say that she never expected to encounter a S-class missing ninja at a tiny teashop. He is tall and broad, with blue skin and gill markings on his face.

Sakura has heard stories from her friends in Kiri about the legendary Seven Swordsmen. She knows that Kisame opposed the tyranny of the Bloody Mist and was excommunicated for his… brutal methods of opposition. Still, she heard admiration in Chōjūrō’s voice when he spoke of the man.

So, taking a deep breath, she approaches the man, flaring her chakra before snuffing it completely in an announcement of her presence. The man glances up at her, clearly surprised that she even chose to approach. His eyes flit over her, though Sakura is certain he examined her when she first arrived.

“Is this seat taken?” she inquires.

“Konoha, huh?” he asks, eyes locked on the headband around her neck. “Take a seat.”

Sakura swallows, ever so slightly before seating herself. She knows already that Sarutobi-sensei is going to have strong words with her the moment he returns. Akatsuki is not one of Konoha’s active enemies but it is always wise to be wary of missing nin. Still, Sakura doubts that she even registers as a threat on Hoshigaki’s radar. His chakra pool is massive; more extensive than any she has felt before.

Sakura sticks her right hand out in a fist, palm down, holding it for five seconds before drawing it across her chest. It is the greeting utilized by everyone in Kiri’s rebellion. His eyes widen briefly before lidding. “You’re getting more and more interesting, kid,” he states, interest alighting his eyes. “Name?”

“Sakura,” she replies.

“Last name?” he inquires, brow raised.

“Haruno. Not one you would have ever heard of.”

“First generation ninja huh? I’m sure you know who I am already,” Kisame states.

It is not arrogance that drives his statement. His cloak is covered in red clouds and his appearance is rather unique already.

Sakura nods.

“You have nerves of steel to approach me, pinkie,” he informs her.

“Obviously,” she replies, taking a breath before adding, “hammerhead.”

Her risk is rewarded with thunderous laughter. “You’re a riot kid, I can tell you that,” he says, slapping his leg. A waitress approaches with Sakura’s dango, leaving quickly. “I’ll cover your bill. Consider it a treat for your entertainment.”

“Thank you,” she says.
It is hard for her to believe that this man is a S-class criminal, though Kiri would probably take him back now.

“What can I do for you, pinkie?” he asks, leaning back as she digs into her dango with enthusiasm.

“What’s his name?” Sakura inquires, nodding to the sword at the giant man’s back.

“How do you know he has a name?” Kisame responds.

She shrugs. “I am learning to use the naginata. A good friend who understands weapons well told me that all the best weapons have names.”

Chōjūrō’s sword is named Hiramekarei and he has told her that all of the Seven Swords have names and distinct personalities. She herself is still trying to decide on a name for her naginata.

“His name is Samehada,” Kisame finally replies. “So what brought you over here?”

“Just some advice,” she says in response. “My mentor and I recently traveled to Kiri. I am told it is much changed since the days of the Bloody Mist. The Godaime Mizukage is bringing in a new era, one of relative peace.” Sakura stares up at him. “I am sure she would welcome any of the Swordsmen with open arms.”

Kisame crosses his arms, watching her with a frown. “That’s not really advice,” he points out. “It’s common knowledge.”

Sakura nods agreeably. “Very well. Some advice regarding your…partner, Yakushi Kabuto. He is originally of Konoha.” She stares up at him, green eyes serious. “Do not trust him. His first loyalties do not lie with Konoha or Akatsuki. They lie with Orochimaru. He has no concept of bonds with others. He will betray you if Akatsuki comes into conflict with Orochimaru. There will come a day that he will turn on you without mercy. He did the same to me and my team. Watch your back.”

Sakura stands, bowing with her hands clasped in front in the traditional Land of Water style. “Thank you for the meal. I am in your debt Hoshigaki-san.”

She begins to leave, still disbelieving of the surreal encounter.

“Pinkie!” he calls as she approaches the door. “Your naginata…” he pauses, smiling and revealing long, sharp teeth. “Sashimasu.”

Sakura laughs, bright and joyful as she returns to the onsen for a long-awaited bath.

The perfect name for the perfect weapon.

Sting.

Chapter End Notes

so, part I of the chunin arc is complete. we are completely in AU territory. akatsuki has yet to attack konoha in a bid to get naruto because konoha remained strong after the attack. having an army of uchiha really changes things, doesn’t it? hiruzen lived and konoha is flourishing. thoughts? favorite scenes? please let me know! thank you
for all of your support on the past few chapters and I hope you keep loving the story.

-jay
They arrive in Kumo at the beginning of winter.

Konoha is famed for its fair weather. There are few snowfalls and most are dampened by the surrounding trees. Sakura is used to perhaps a scant inch of snow upon the ground, melting into slush and puddles by high noon. Many a happy day was spent leaping into those puddles during her childhood, Ino at her side. Kumogakure, however, lies high in the mountains, unprotected from the sky above. It is the village hidden in the clouds after all. Sakura has never experienced a bitter cold quite like this. It seeps into her bones and sits there, a heavy weight throbbing against her ribs. Her fingertips sting as she flexes, a bone-deep reminder of her fight with Gaara.

Sakura finds that she does not like the cold.

Sakura exhales, staring as her breath whirls about in front of her. Sarutobi-sensei stares at her out of the corner of his eyes, amused.

"We'll need to do some shopping, won't we, Sakura-chan?" he teases. "I thought you were prepared for anything."

Sakura puffs out her cheeks, pulling her flak vest tighter around her. "Forgive me, but this didn't exactly come to mind when I was packing."

His grin widens and he nudges her shoulder as he pulls out his passport.

Sakura likes this one-on-one teaching style. While Kakashi-sensei will always hold a special place in her heart for being her genin instructor, Sakura knows that she is closer to Sarutobi-sensei. His genial and open personality almost directly contrasts Kakashi-sensei’s distant persona. Sakura sincerely hopes that the antics of Naruto, Sasuke, and Sai can continue to thaw his remote attitude. From the letters she’s received, it seems it has already begun.

Sakura notes the disgruntled attitude that the guards take as they examine their passports, seeming disgusted at their very existence. Sakura sends her teacher a questioning look but he ignores it. Sakura cannot help but wonder what sort of propaganda about Konoha has been shared in Kumo.

Sakura faintly remembers the smear campaign that took place in Konoha throughout her childhood. The people of Kumo were given derogatory names like "mountain men" and "cave dwellers." Her parents even took part in it, telling her stories of the Kumo nin who would come and take her away.
if she misbehaved. Then the Hyuuga incident occurred and the "ghost stories" had actual validation. All immigrants from Kumogakure and the Land of Lightning were rounded up and interrogated. It was not a happy time in Konoha.

Sakura wonders if she is a boogeyman to the children of Kumogakure.

They make it through customs at a much slower pace than Kiri, but they make it through unscathed nonetheless. Sakura steps through the gates, staring up at the village around her. It is much different than both Kiri and Konoha.

The buildings are built into the mountains themselves, rising high above the clear streets. Many are painted in resplendent colors, a veritable rainbow emerging among the fog. The air is thin and crisp, and Sakura's lungs burn with every inhale. Everything is enshrouded in clouds. It gives the village a mysterious, insulated atmosphere.

Sakura follows her teacher's lead, heading up the winding stairs into a warm, cheerful clothing store. Sarutobi-sensei bustles his way through the store, pulling out multiple garments in bright, rich colors of oranges and reds. Sakura stands to the side, trusting his fashion sense.

"New around here?" a voice inquires in the thick, harsh accent characteristic of Kumogakure.

Sakura swallows, feeling embarrassed for a moment about her own accent, all rolling letters and unspoken syllables. Still, she turns and says, "You could say that."

She is greeted by dark eyes and a darker look from the middle-aged shopkeeper dressed in a lively purple. The look clears quickly, replaced with one of calculation as she examines Sakura's headband. "Here on official business I take it?"

Sakura nods, feeling miserable. "Yes ma'am."

The woman regards her seriously. "I'm going to need you to leave. We don't serve Konoha nin."

"That will not be necessary," Sarutobi-sensei cuts in solemnly, stepping up beside Sakura.

The woman's eyes go wide. "I…apologize, Professor. I did not realize she was traveling with you."

The woman bows and disappears behind the counter.

"I…I'm going to step outside," Sakura blurts, hurrying out the door, cheeks flaming red.

She has only received such looks of fear and disgust while in direct battle with others. She is used to being hated by those she fights. After all, they aim to kill one another. Hatred is an acceptable emotion. This is the first time she has been regarded with deep hatred by someone for merely existing in her presence.

For the first time, Sakura understands that being a shinobi of Konoha is not respected worldwide. She is used to civilians greeting her happily and children asking to be entertained with simple tricks. She is flush with both humiliation and cold as she leans out over the railing to better survey the village. She wonders if there is any chance to overcome the prejudice that exists between Konohagakure and Kumogakure. With shame, she remembers the wary way she regards Kumo immigrants. She never meant anything by it but Sakura resolves to do so no longer.

"Deep thoughts?" Sarutobi-sensei inquires, laden down with packages.

Sakura shrugs. "I am thinking at the very least."
He smiles sadly. "I apologize for…well, that back there. Not everyone is so closed minded."

"Why did she call you 'the Professor?'" Sakura asks, taking more than half of the packages as they meander off to their hotel.

"Ah," Sarutobi-sensei chuckles. "It is the name that I am referred to by in certain Bingo Books, including Kumogakure's. I've visited Kumo on multiple occasions, so I suppose they are used to me around here."

Sakura nods, still deep in thought. Her perceptions have changed and she knows it is for the better even though it smarts right now. One of her hands unconsciously comes up to play with her hitae-ate.

Sarutobi-sensei tuts, gently reaching out and brushing her hand aside. "Wear it proudly, even when surrounded by those who will despise you for it. You have earned the right to wear the hitae-ate with your blood, sweat, and tears. Your efforts have come to fruition; no one may take it away from you."

Sakura smiles slightly, readjusting the protector around her neck so it is shown prominently. She may be hated here because of her roots, but Sakura is a Konoha nin through and through.

They head into the Kage Tower as night is falling. Sakura is newly dressed in splendid layers of turquoise and lapis lazuli. The Kumogakure people enjoy clothing of jewel tones and Sakura cannot blame them. She guesses it may be because of the lack of color in their surroundings, the dreary mountains being the main landscape. While majestic in their own way, the mountains cannot compete with Konoha's lush and vibrant flora.

The Raikage Tower is the highest vantage point of the village and Sakura gazes out into the darkening sky as they wait for their meeting.

"The stars are much clearer here," Sakura observes, face almost pressed against the glass.

Sarutobi smiles. "We are much closer to the stars as well," he replies.

Sakura hesitates only for a moment before saying, "I like the sky here more than Konoha's."

His smile gentles. "It is good to see the strengths in other villages. There is no fault in liking certain aspects of other places more."

Sakura nods and they sit in companionable silence for a time.

"Yo!" a voice exclaims. "My bro can see you now!"

The duo looks up, startled out of contemplation. Sakura assesses the tall, dark man before her. He wears sunglasses and his hair is a very light shade of blond.

"Thank you," Sarutobi replies gracefully, rising to his feet. "I am Sarutobi Hiruzen and this is my apprentice Haruno Sakura."

The man scrutinizes them. "Konoha, huh?" Sakura braces herself for his abhorrence. Instead he shrugs. "Nice to meet you. I'm Killer Bee." He shakes hands vigorously with both of them. "I see you've adapted to the Kumo custom of dress quite easily." He turns to regard Sakura specifically. "Haruno was it? I'll be seeing you around, I think you can inspire some great raps."
And with that, Killer Bee flounces away.

Sakura stares up at her mentor with wide eyes. He merely shrugs. "Minato-kun told me stories of Killer Bee's...eccentricities, but I took them for granted." Sarutobi shakes his wryly. "I should have listened. Killer Bee is the Raikage's brother."

The two enter the Kage's office, uncertain of what to expect. The Kage is an incredibly tall, incredibly built man dressed in resplendent robes of emerald and sapphire hues. His back is to them which, as a ninja, can be either a sign of respect (because he trusts them not to attack) or a slight (because he does not believe them to be ninja of his caliber). Sakura prays it is the former.

The man turns, pale blond dreadlocks moving with him as he strides forward to stand before Sarutobi. It is almost comical, the way the Raikage towers over the wizen former Hokage. Sakura marvels at the fact that these two were once engaged in a war against one another.

"Professor," the Raikage finally greets, relaxing his stance.

"A-sama," Sarutobi-sensei replies with a bow. "We have traveled quite a ways to see you."

"So you have!" A booms, slapping Sarutobi-sensei on the back and retiring to his chair. "Take a seat!"

Sakura sits down tentatively, hiding a smirk as Sarutobi-sensei makes his way to a chair at a much slower pace. A's slaps appear to be anything but gentle. Sakura is glad that she has thus far been ignored.

"Are you going to introduce us Professor?"

Or not.

Sakura looks up into calculating black eyes. "I am Haruno Sakura, Raikage-sama," she intones, bowing slighting at the waist, never removing her eyes from him.

It is not a challenge, but Sakura bows fully to no one but the Hokage.

Thankfully, A laughs. "You're a gutsy one, aren't you, Haruno-kun?"

Sakura smiles but says nothing.

"She is my apprentice," Sarutobi-sensei chimes in. "I have been watching her progress closely since her days in the Academy. She is destined for great things and she has yet to prove me wrong."

Sakura flushes at the high praise as A's gaze turns speculative. "Another 'child of prophecy,' huh?" He grins. "Interesting. So tell me why you are here."

Sarutobi-sensei leans forward. "As I am sure you know, my former pupil has started a rogue shinobi nation of his own, Oto. This nation knows no borders and travels around nomadically. If Oto were a peaceful nation, I would have no qualms over their structure but they have proven to be a malignant parasite. Oto has mounted an attack that left both Sunagakure and Konohagakure weakened."

"And what would you have me do?" A asks, brow arched.

Sakura notes that there is no surprise on his face. It is obvious that he is well-connected to the political turmoil of the other nations.
Sarutobi-sensei's face is grave. "I fear Orochimaru's goal is to weaken each of the shinobi nations. He attempted to pit Suna against Konoha. There is no doubt in my mind that he will try the same with the other nations. Once all the nations have waned in power, Orochimaru will undoubtedly take power.

"We would like to form a treaty with Kumogakure and overcome the enmity that has existed between our two nations for too long now." Sarutobi pulls out a scroll and places it on A's desk. "Tsunade-hime has given me leave to act as her spokesperson in this matter."

A regards him and Sakura reads a turbulent history in their eyes. She cannot help but wonder if they ever encountered one another in the battlefield during the Second Shinobi World War.

Finally, he shakes his head slightly. "I cannot agree to a treaty just yet. I need to speak with my council and my people's representatives before I make a decision." His eyes are cold. "I know you took advantage of Kiri's political upset to ensure a treaty between your two nations. Mei-sama undoubtedly pounced on the chance to have the backing of one of the strongest shinobi nations on her side. It will quiet her dissenters."

Sarutobi-sensei sighs, rubbing his temples. "There is no reason for hatred between the two of us. I understand and empathize with your position. Let us not allow prejudice to blind us. You and I both know the propaganda spread by both of our nations is just that: propaganda."

A closes his eyes momentarily, exhaling hard. He reopens his eyes, focusing on Sakura. He pins her with a hard look. "And what say you, Haruno-kun? You look to be twelve, thirteen?"

"Thirteen," she replies.

"You've grown up with stories of Kumogakure shinobi as the enemy," he snorts. "What say you?"

Sakura fidgets for a moment beneath his stare before straightening at Sarutobi-sensei's encouraging nod. "My parents told me that shinobi from Kumogakure would take me away if I were bad," she informs the man. "Then there was an attempt to take Hyuuga Hinata," She catches his slight flinch, "and all parents, civilian and shinobi alike, felt validated in their claims.

"However, the retaliation against the immigrants from Kumo, the intense scrutiny they were subjected to, was unfair and unjust. They are now citizens of Konoha and deserve to be treated that way." Shame licks at her breast, leaving her burnt and hollow. "I know now that my suspicion and dislike of Kumo ninja stems from biased propaganda that I have been subjected to throughout my whole life.

"I would like to get to know the true Kumogakure," Sakura adds. "I have been exposed to beautiful parts of your culture since arriving." She holds up her sleeves. "I did not know that the clothing of Kumo was so vibrant and beautiful. I did not know that your buildings ride high among the clouds on the sides of mountains. Your stars are brighter than Konoha's. I have learned much in only a short amount of time. I would like to learn even more."

By the end of her impromptu speech, Sakura's throat is dry, her lips are chapped, and she wonders if she even made sense. Still, A is watching her with interest and Sarutobi-sensei seems proud, so hopefully her point made it through to the two of them.

"Very well," A finally says. "Go and get acclimated to the altitude. Drink a lot of water. I'll bring up the topic with my council tomorrow." He stands and shakes both of their hands. A pulls out a bright orange ribbon. "Wear these around your wrists. You will be able to access the training grounds with these. Professor, I will see you tomorrow. Haruno-kun...feel free to 'get to know the
true Kumogakure," he parrots back to her.

Sakura grins. "I will."

The next morning dawns cold and overcast. Sakura keeps her grumbling to a minimum as she rolls off of Tamaki, her large polar bear Summon who enjoys cuddling in the wee hours of the night, and begins to dress in her many layers.

Tamaki watches her with sleepy red eyes before popping out of existence. Sakura scowls, rubbing her arms. She wishes to get out of this miserable cold. Still, she bundles up in the clothing provided by her gracious teacher and makes her way outside.

Sarutobi-sensei has already left for the day, scheduled for long meetings with Kumogakure's council. Sakura is glad that she is not invited to these meetings. She has found that council members, no matter their nation of origin, tend to be stuffy and monotonous. Her lips quirk in a smile; perhaps that is a uniting commonality among the nations.

She stretches, attaching her pouches to her hip and right leg before exiting their hotel room. Sakura has free reign today and she plans to immerse herself in the heart of Kumogakure. She makes her way to the flower shop she spotted yesterday, making sure that her orange ribbon is displayed prominently on her wrist. She steps inside, fascinated by the stark differences between this florist shop and the Yamanaka's store back in Konoha.

There is an extensive collection of vibrant flowers, ranging in all sorts of colors. The clash of colors is jarring and Sakura blinks a few times as she makes her way through the shop. There are plants from all of the nations but Sakura is most interested in the collection of plants native to Kumo.

As she peruses, a shop keeper approaches her. "How are you finding everything, lass?" the thick-set woman asks, watching her with scrutiny.

Braced for rejection, Sakura turns to the woman fully with a smile. "I am well, thank you. How are you?"

The woman's eyes brighten with recognition. "Konoha, huh? Been a while since I visited. Those pupil-less people still running the flower shop over there?"

Sakura snorts, though immensely relieved that this woman hasn't thrown her out. "The Yamanaka still own the flower shop."

The woman nods decisively. "Good group, those Yamanaka. They may have freaky eyes but," The woman shrugs, "a lot of shinobi clans do. Got some nice Konoha-based plants from them. I'm Shiki by the way."

"Sakura," the chūnin returns, scratching her cheek awkwardly. "Not to be rude or anything, but…"

"Why am I alright with 'Konoha scum' in my shop?" Shiki interrupts with a throaty laugh. "Not everyone in Kumogakure is fueled by ignorance and warmongering tactics of installing fear." She eyes Sakura wryly as the girl flushes. "You'll find a lot of folk around here have family in Konoha or, at the very least, know people living there."

"I apologize," Sakura says with a bow, bringing her left leg behind her in a traditional bow of Lightning. "I have only been here for a short time and my first encounter…" she trails off. "It wasn't very pleasant."
Shiki nods, empathy clear in her eyes. "Unfortunately, fear of the unknown drives many people. Still, there are people in your corner, you aren't alone." Her brown eyes crinkle up happily and, for a moment, she is the most beautiful woman Sakura has ever seen. "You have friends here, Sakura-san."

"Oka-san! Oka-san!" a voice exclaims.

Sakura turns as a blur rushes past her to attach itself to Shiki.

The woman adjusts her weight, sighing soundlessly as her arms are suddenly full of a young girl, maybe eight years old. She is short and plump, with dark skin and eyes that match her mother's.

"Aren't you supposed to be in class right now, Akari?" Shiki asks her daughter, eyes alight with mirth.

Akari pouts. "But it's so boring!" she whines. "I've already learned how to throw a kunai!"

Her mother laughs outright. "Akari, you can barely walk in a straight line, let alone throw a kunai in one."

Sakura watches their antics with a smile until the young girl notices their company. "Hi there!" she greets. "I'm Akari. I'm going to be the strongest ninja in Kumo; stronger even than Nii-sama!"

"Nii-sama?" Sakura asks. "Your brother?"

The girl shakes her head. "No, Nii-sama. She's the strongest shinobi in our entire village!"

"She sounds pretty neat," Sakura replies, unsure of how to interact with this exuberant child.

Akari finally notices her hitae-ate. Her eyes go round. "You're from Konoha?" As Sakura nods, the girl wheels on her mother. "Oka-san, can I take her to the Academy with me?" she pleads. "I want to hear some stories about Konohagakure!"

"You haven't even asked her name yet," Shiki replies, amused.

"I'm Sakura," Sakura greets.

"Go grab your gear from behind the counter," Shiki tells her daughter. "You keep leaving it here. "Sakura-kun, would you like to go with Akari to the Academy? She's headstrong, but she's a good girl."

"I'd be happy to accompany her," Sakura replies with a grin. She wants to see the real Kumogakure and she thinks the children will undoubtedly be one of the best ways to do so. Children tend to be unflinchingly honest, almost brutal in their perceptions of the world.

"Before you go," Shiki begins, grabbing a few items that she presses into Sakura's hands. "I'd like to give you some seeds. These are lavender mountain lilies, which only grow here in Kumogakure. She smiles widely. "Remember your friends here in Kumogakure."

Sakura feels a mist in her eyes. "Thank you," she replies sincerely.

There is hope yet for an alliance between Kumogakure and Konohagakure.

The days pass quickly after her eventful first encounter with Shiki and Akari. Sarutobi-sensei is locked in meeting after meeting with the higher ups of Kumo. He returns every night, drained but
optimistic. He is faced with a lot of opposition, but there are many, much like Shiki said, that want peace between the two villages.

Sakura spends her mornings at the Academy. Many of the students were afraid of her or disliked her when she first came but most are won over with tricks and tips to make their journey to becoming shinobi easier. She teaches them tree walking and some of the most common Konoha katas. She isn't sharing information that may endanger her own village and Sakura enjoys teaching. It is not a rare sight to find Sakura meditating in the midst of children from the ages of six to eleven years old.

She wonders what Indra and Ashura would say if they could see her right now. Ashura would undoubtedly pout at the loss of attention while Indra would sit beside her, meditating silently. Both would be proud. Sakura's heart lurches and she changes the direction of her thoughts.

Her afternoons are generally spent in the company of Shiki or Akari, exploring the village and getting to know its residents. It is quite common to find village children, both civilian and shinobi-in-training alike, following her around and begging for stories or tricks from the foreign ninja. It is during one of these excursions, when she is showing a small group of children how to water walk, that she meets Nii Yugito.

This is how it happens:

She is standing on the water, going through a kata that she has modified with a minor water jutsu that creates bubbles. The Kumo children are watching her with awe, giggling as they pop the bubbles. Sakura is glad that she has created a peaceful version of this jutsu.

Usually, the bubbles are laced with poison, ranging from paralytic to lethal in nature.

(She and Ino continue to hone their craft, reaching for the illusive title of Poison Mistress.)

She is startled out of her musings by clapping right behind her. She starts, losing her focus and disrupting her chakra balance. All the bubbles pop as she begins to fall into the water. Only her feet get wet before she regains control.

"I apologize," a soft voice states.

Sakura turns to the speaker, shaking off her feet. The woman is tall and dressed in standard jōnin Kumo armor that clings to a well-muscled body. Her blonde hair is pulled into a low ponytail and her dark eyes run over Sakura's face in assessment.

"Don't worry about it," Sakura replies, making her way to solid ground, slightly concerned about the appearance of a jōnin ninja.

Most of Kumogakure's ninja are incredibly busy. The only ones that Sakura has encountered are in the Raikage's Tower or teachers at the Academy. She thinks this is why the children have warmed to her so quickly; she is the only ninja with free time to teach them tricks and give them some form of entertainment. To have an unknown shinobi appear…

"Nii-sama!" Akari squeals, skipping over to them. The other children are gathering around too, wide grins on their faces. "How are you?"

"I am well, Akari-san," the jōnin woman replies with a slight smile. "I would like to speak with Haruno-san alone."

Akari crosses her arms, a scowl thundering across her expression. "Why?" she asks, voice laced in
suspicion.

Should she choose it, Akari would make a fine interrogator some day. Her protectiveness is, quite frankly, adorable, but Sakura can handle herself.

"It's alright, Akari-chan," Sakura replies. "I'll come by Shiki-san's store tonight."

Akari eyes her for a long moment before shrugging and leading the troupe of children away.

Nii watches Sakura. "You've gotten to know the children well. They are less set in their ways than adults."

Sakura shrugs. "As you seem to already know, I am Haruno Sakura of Konohagakure. It is nice to meet you."

"I am Nii Yugito of Kumogakure," the woman replies. She cocks her head to the side in interest. "I recently returned from a long mission and I've heard some interesting things about you, Miss Pacifist Ninja." Her face splits into a Cheshire grin.

Sakura huffs, averting her gaze for a moment. It seems that, for better or worse (most likely worse), she is stuck with the nickname. "That's...fantastic."

"Aside from your entertaining chūnin performance, I have heard about you from Bee and A-sama. Their reports have been...unique. You wish to get to know the true Kumogakure?"

"That is my intention, yes," Sakura replies, meeting Nii's fierce gaze. She will not bend on this.

Nii grins and it is all wolves' teeth and brimstone. "Then you need to understand her fighters. Let's spar."

Sakura swallows, but nods anyway.

She may be about to die but at least it will be at the hands of the strongest shinobi of Kumogakure.

Yugito proves to be a solid warrior and an elite ninja. She and Sakura train on a near daily basis. Yugito's chakra nature is Fire and she utilizes her hair in battle in a way that Sakura has never imagined in her wildest dreams. (She will be incorporating some of her techniques if and when she gets the chance.)

More than that though, Yugito is a good friend.

She is incredibly wise and well-traveled. Sakura finds herself seeking advice and support from the older woman. She shares theories and trades tips with Yugito. They speak of their unique cultures and spend time after every spar laying out on one of mountains that overlooks the village, just enjoying the company of the other.

It is on one such occasion, a month after their first meeting, when Sakura finally brings up a question that has been bothering her. They are seated upon a bench within one of the many beautiful rock gardens that Kumo hosts within its bounds. This one boasts an exclusively quartz arrangement.

Sakura is not a Sensor nin by any means, but she has noticed something familiar in the patterns of Yugito's chakra. Something in the ebb and flow...almost an echo of sorts, reverberating back through in an endless cycle. It is mesmerizing and hypnotic.
"Yugito, are you…are you a jinchūriki?" Sakura inquires.

Yugito regards her with surprise. "You didn't know?"

"It isn't a secret?" Sakura returns, straightening in her seat. Naruto's status was hidden away from everyone of her generation, including him.

Yugito shakes her head slowly, heavy lidded eyes wide. "Certainly not. Killer Bee and I are the jinchūriki of Kumogakure."

"Killer Bee as well?" Sakura asks, thinking hard. She has had multiple run-ins with the eccentric ninja, each as jarring as the last. She has never really had the chance to pay attention to his chakra as he possessed a singular penchant for setting Sakura completely off-balance.

"If no one told you, how did you figure it out?"

Sakura hesitates only for a moment. "It was your chakra. It feels…different. A few of my friends are jinchūriki and their chakra is similar."

Yugito smiles. "And what does my chakra feel like?"

Sakura furrows her brow, staring up at the sky as she tries to put her thoughts into words. Yugito, used to Sakura's thoughtful responses, waits patiently.

"It…it feels deeper and stronger than any non-jinchūriki. And, there's something…odd about it I guess. Like…two overlapping chakras. Yours is different than my friends' though."

"How so?" Yugito queries.

"It's…tranquil," Sakura replies thinking of Naruto and Gaara. "My friends…it's like they are constantly struggling with the other chakra."

Yugito hums in agreement, lips curling into a wry smile. "You sure you aren't a Sensor? You have a keen understanding of other people's chakra."

Sakura shakes her head. "I can pick up on differences but I'm a lousy tracker. I have to be sitting still to even really pick up on anything."

"In any case, it's probably different because Matatabi and I have become friends," Yugito states.

"Matatabi?" Sakura asks.

"Matatabi, Nibi, the two-tailed beast, my jinchūriki and friend," Yugito says with a soft smile.

"You've…befriended it?" Sakura asks, thinking of her friends back home. Both were and are treated as monsters for the jinchūriki within them. Sakura has been told by both Gaara and Naruto that their jinchūriki were not exactly kind.

"Him," she corrects with amusement clear in her voice. "Make no mistake, Matatabi was…difficult to deal with in the beginning. He and I were brought together when I was two years old. The former jinchūriki holder of the eight-tailed beast helped me with the transition, but he passed away when I was five. Matatabi and I still weren't on speaking terms at that time. He liked to play tricks on me."

"What happened?" Sakura asks, enraptured.
Yugito's lips turn up in a soft smile. "Killer Bee happened. We, the both of us, were discriminated against because we were jinchūriki. There was a reason for it, but Bee refused to bow to the hatred directed toward him. It helped that we had each other for support. Bee befriended Gyūki and demanded that everyone address Gyūki as 'Eight-tailed-sama.' So, I decided to do the same with Matatabi."

"How?" Sakura inquires, desperate for more knowledge. She wants to pass the information on to her friends and make their lives easier. If she can spare Naruto and Gaara any future suffering, she will.

"There is a place inside, where Matatabi is sealed. It's where we go to speak." Yugito's eyes are distant and Sakura knows she is in that place right now. "Bee tells me his looks different so I suppose it depends on the jinchūriki. I was probably eight or maybe nine when I first went there to talk to Matatabi, who I only knew as Nibi at the time. I was terrified."

"So what did you do?"

Yugito grins, shaking her head in amazement. "I went right up to him and sat down between his paws. Matatabi is a huge feline. Sometimes, I still can't believe my audacity." She snorts loudly. "Matatabi can't, that's for sure. He says he's impressed that a little scrap of a girl approached him like that.

"After that, we just started talking. He told me his true name and I demanded that he stop messing with me. In return, I give him more free rein in my head and in battles. He gets to see everything I see."

"Does...does he see me right now?" Sakura asks tentatively.

"Yes," Yugito replies readily. "He thinks your eyes are very cat-like."

"Er...thanks," Sakura says, unsure of the proper response.

Yugito laughs, loud and clear as she lifts a canister. "Try this. It's warmed chocolate."

Sakura takes the drink, raising it to her lips with hesitation. She takes a swig, surprised as it goes down smooth and hot. It soothes her throat with the rich, creamy texture. Her eyes go wide as she turns to Yugito who, in turn, begins to laugh. "That's delicious!"

Yugito grins as she wraps an arm around the girl's shoulder, careful of the weapons in her hair. "Enough talk. It's time for more training! Bee's joining us today. Two against one."

"Us against Bee?"

Yugito shakes her head. "Jinchūriki versus you."

Sakura's eyes are wide with horror as Yugito's raucous laughter ricochets through the mountains.

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Sakura has had innumerable unpleasant experiences in Kumogakure thus far. Most are fairly standard and small. Petty in nature but in no way permanently damaging. Just exhausting, draining Sakura to her marrow. This one, however, tops them all. Yet, some good does come out of it. It happens something like this:

She explores the village on her own, bundled in multiple layers. Killer Bee has knitted her a long,
bright yellow scarf that is twined many times around her neck and head. Tufts of her hair and her eyes are about the only thing visible. It is late into the winter season and it is absolutely brutal in Kumogakure. Sakura's lungs are well-used to the thin air and the burn of the wind at this point but she still doesn't like it.

Most of the villagers are accustomed to the Konoha ninja who walks among them and some of them have even invited her to dinner because of their children at the Academy. Sakura endures the good-natured ribbing about her clothes as she treks toward the morning market in search for trinkets and souvenirs for her friends.

She is nodding to one of the shop vendors when it happens.

"You," a voice calls. "Konoha dog."

Sakura turns in surprise, catching sight of a young man who is about the same age as Yugito. He is tall and blond, with dark eyes and pale skin. From his white flak jacket, Sakura knows that he must be a jōnin.

She raises an eyebrow at him before turning away, choosing not to respond to his slur. She has learned the hard way that the best response is to simply not reply.

"Hey!" he growls, grabbing her arm. "I was speaking to you, cur."

Sakura shakes off his hand, turning back to the man. He is at least ten years older than she is and she wonders why he cares so much. "And I was ignoring you," she replies placidly.

His face flushes angrily and Sakura realizes that she probably shouldn't have gone for the snarky response. "You have no right to speak to me this way," he claims.

Sakura shrugs. "I apologize for offending you. I need to finish up some shopping right now." She turns away, sighing heavily as he grabs her arm once more. Her eyes flash as she looks up at the man again. "Yes?"

"You uppity bitch!" he exclaims. Sakura's eyes go wide. It is her first time to be addressed as such. "How dare you disregard a ninja of Kumogakure?"

His chakra is flaring and people are beginning to notice their altercation. Sakura's arm aches and she knows there will be bone-deep bruises. Her eyes shunt to the side as she thinks quickly. She does not want to fight here. She knows that, as a foreign nin, she is on the losing side of the upcoming battle. No one will come to her defense, even if she only acts to protect herself. She will be painted as the aggressor, the villain.

As it turns out, she doesn't have to come to a solution.

A dark hand is laid on the blond man's shoulder. "What's going on here, C?" a new figure asks.

He is tall and dark, with shaggy blond hair hanging down over his left eye. He wears the same flak jacket as C.

"This Konoha dog needs to be taught a lesson, Darui," C replies, lips curling in a sneer.

Darui's eyes peruse the both of them, lingering on Sakura's pink hair with a bemused smile. "I doubt the boss would like that. I know we've been away for a while but you know as well as I do that the boss is working on a treaty with Konohagakure."
C's eyes blaze. "It won't work. There's too much bad blood. They're dogs and they will bite the hand that feeds them. Konoha is not reasonable; like mangy curs they must be put down."

Sakura shakes her head, ripping her arm away from C's hand. "With a mentality like that, it's surprising that you're even allowed outside the village. There can…" she pauses. "There will be peace between our two villages, despite what you may think or want. Get used to the dogs," she says sardonically.

C scowls, pretty face distorted into an ugly pantomime. "This isn't over dog," he threatens before disappearing.

Sakura sighs, rubbing her sore wrist.

"That went well," Darui comments. Sakura looks up, startled that he is still here. He smiles lazily at her and raises a hand for a jaunty wave. "Yep, still here."

Sakura rubs the back of her neck awkwardly, before offering him a handshake. "I'm Haruno Sakura."

"Sorry about that, Haruno-kun," Darui says after shaking her hand. "My partner is forceful when it comes to the defense of the village."

"But I'm not a threat!" Sakura exclaims. "I'm here on a diplomatic mission with a former Kage!"

"For C, if you aren't Kumo, you aren't safe," Darui replies easily, falling into step with her as she restarts her journey to the market. "He lost family in the war between our villages."

Sakura frowns at the pang of empathy that wells in her chest. "I am sorry to hear that. Still, that does not make me responsible. I lost family as well."

"He is…entrenched in his belief that Kumo is the best of all nations."

"That seems to be an understatement," Sakura says dryly, arm throbbing in reminder.

"Perhaps," Darui replies. "Still, there are many who agree with him."

"Do you?" Sakura asks, examining the man's profile.

"Nah," he returns easily, shucking his hands in his pockets. "There are good ninja and bad ninja in every nation, just as there are good people and bad people everywhere. I know that there are stronger ninja than me in the other villages. People will be people, no matter their location."

Sakura nods, a smile stretching across her lips slowly. She likes this man and his simple, practical wisdom. He reminds her of Yugito. It seems many people in Kumo are grounded, despite the way their land rises above the clouds. "I've noticed."

He hums, pausing to examine some items and picking up a vividly painted wooden doll. He pays for it and shows it to Sakura. "This is a matryoshka doll," he explains. He gently twists its midsection and it pops apart. Sakura makes a sound of surprise when she sees the smaller doll within. "There are nine in all," he says.

Sakura watches, entranced, as he pulls the second doll apart. "That's so cool," she murmurs as Darui begins to put them back together again.

He smiles in amusement before passing it to her. "Keep it," he says. "Consider it an apology gift
for the idiocy of my partner."

"I couldn't—" she begins to protest.

"Please," he interrupts. "I'm sure you've learned that apology gifts are a staple of Kumogakure culture. To reject one is incredibly insulting."

Sakura stares at him, unsure if he is joking or not. His face doesn't give it away but Sakura has never heard of this "apology gift" in her time here in Kumogakure. Still, she doesn't want to offend him.

"Thank you," she says, grabbing the item from his hand gently.

"No problem," he replies with a bright grin. "I better go check in with the boss; he doesn't always remember to eat lunch and Bee is away on a mission. See you around!"

Sakura beams in return, watching his retreating back. Once he is gone she returns to her hunt for souvenirs.

It is a late night when Sarutobi-sensei comes back to their adjoining suite, weary but triumphant.

"We did it," he whispers, almost in shock. "We actually did it."

Sakura cheers, leaping up from her bed and joining her sensei in the living room. "The council agreed?"

"Finally," he huffs, falling onto the couch heavily and leaning back with a sigh. "We've reached terms that are acceptable to both parties."

"So, what now?" Sakura asks.

"Now, we get everyone used to being allies," he replies grimly. "Some, as you know full well, are…resistant to change." His eyes brighten as he enters what Sakura affectionately calls, "Lecture Mode." "A civilian came up with something known as the 'contact hypothesis.' It states that conflict between two separate groups can be overcome if the two groups are made to work together toward a common goal. They must interact with one another and get to know each other. It reminds both groups that the other is comprised of human beings. They are forced to communicate and understand each other."

Sakura nods, liking the idea. "How do you plan on implementing this process?"

Sarutobi smirks. "Combining teams between the villages. They obviously will not be sent on any high-profile mission but the shinobi of both villages will take on C- and B-ranked missions together."

Sakura's eyebrows rise. "There is bound to be resistance."

Sarutobi-sensei nods. "Undoubtedly. People are always resistant to change. Still, A-sama and Tsunade-hime will be talking to their most high-profile and popular ninja to be the pioneers of this program. It will lead the way for other shinobi."

Sakura nods. "And our plan?"

"We leave tomorrow morning as dawn breaks. There is supposed to be a snowstorm coming in soon and I'd rather be out of here before that begins. We will be visiting Suna shortly on our way to
Sakura nods, feeling somewhat crestfallen and forlorn. She has made some good friends here in Kumo, despite adversity and she feels their departure is sudden and jarring. She wants to spend more time with Akari and Shiki, spar once more with Bee and Yugito, and shop for random items with Darui. Sarutobi-sensei pats her back gently. "You will see them again. I have no doubt that Nii, Bee, and Darui-san will be among the first to collaborate with Konoha on missions. You can always write your friends from the flower shop."

Sakura nods, still slightly upset. Orders are orders however and she moves back into her own room to pack her things.

Even with her sadness over leaving dampening her spirits, Sakura cannot stop the frisson of excitement low in her belly.

She's going to see Gaara again.

They travel almost nonstop for the first five days, spending the entirety of Sakura's birthday traveling; keeping pace even long after the sun has set. The storm is setting in and the pair wants to get as far ahead of it as possible. Still, Sakura lags a bit as exhaustion seeps into her bones and the cold bites at her exposed skin.

"Let's stop for tonight," Sarutobi-sensei says, slowing as they stand protected beneath huge, protective trees. It is the best shelter they will find in miles. They are, after all, in the middle of nowhere. "Secure the perimeter. I'll take care of dinner."

Sakura nods and makes quick work of the traps and genjutsu set up around them. Genjutsu is incredibly useful in preventing ambush, alerting the caster when triggered and slowing down the unfortunate individual who stumbled upon the genjutsu. It gives the caster the upper-hand though Sakura does not tend to utilize genjutsu in head-on battle, probably because of the Uchiha she has sparred with for years. Genjutsu is an ineffective weapon against the Sharingan and Sakura's habits die hard.

Once she is finished, she returns and sets up her tent, unrolling her sleeping mat inside. These tasks complete, Sakura takes a seat next to her teacher who has lit a fire.

She raises an eyebrow. "We can risk it?" Sakura queries. They are exceedingly cautious anytime they are outside of Fire's borders.

He chuckles, running through a complex combination of hand seals. It is an unknown jutsu to Sakura but she feels his chakra expand through their camp. "I just cast a dark-out. Don't worry, I'll teach it to you later," he adds. "It expends a good chunk of chakra but I think it's worth it for the night. We'll reach Frost tomorrow. There's a nice inn there we can stay in for a few days to recuperate before continuing on to Wind."

Sakura nods agreeably, glad for the campfire. She warms her hands and her soup, grateful for this hot meal. She is lulled into a state of drowsiness, staring deep into the fire and contemplating her life.

Finally she asks, "Sarutobi-sensei?"

"Hm?" he responds, shaking off his own lethargy.

"You were the teacher to the Sannin, yes?"
Sarutobi-sensei stares at her. Everyone knows he was their teacher. It is common knowledge that Sakura has brought up in the past. For her to skirt her actual question puts Sarutobi-sensei on guard. "Yes," he finally says.

"When…when did Orochimaru defect?" Sakura asks.

His face is unreadable and Sakura fears that she has pushed him past his broad limits. His former team, Orochimaru especially, is a sore, taboo topic that is avoided. Still, Sakura is insatiable in her pursuit of knowledge and understanding. She needs the truth.

Ten minutes pass in complete silence before Sarutobi-sensei exhales deeply. "Orochimaru…you must understand Sakura-chan, even at a young age Orochimaru was peerless. He was a prodigy above all others, seen only once in a generation. He had great ambitions." He stops, looking far older than Sakura has ever seen. "All-consuming ambitions.

"You see, Orochimaru is obsessed with perfection in all forms. He mastered and excelled in all of the techniques that I taught him. When his parents passed…well, Orochimaru realized the ugliness that is death." His smile is brittle and false. "Death is a blemish that stains all around it. It is, at least in Orochimaru's eyes, the eternal sin.

"So Orochimaru began to research ways of ensuring life. For a long time, I thought he was like Tsunade-hime, seeking to preserve life." His eyes plead with Sakura to understand. "We were trapped in the midst of a war that had no true victors. Any attempt for peace, for life, was celebrated. Orochimaru's power and prestige knew no ends. He overcame hurdles and limits that were thought unconquerable.

"I believed he would be my successor," he whispers, eyes deep in the fire.

Sakura gasps, "You mean—?"

Sarutobi-sensei's laugh grates across his throat forcefully. "He was to become Hokage. Everything, absolutely everything, was grand. The war was ended and I had an heir. Unfortunately, it was all a lie.

"We found no relief after the war. It left unimaginable scars, both visible and invisible on shinobi and civilians alike." His mouth twists into a scowl. "I learned of Orochimaru's experiments on his fellow shinobi. He had no regard for life outside his own. So, we fought, he escaped, and I burned his atrocities to the ground. Still, the shinobi he experimented upon had to live on with the torment they suffered at his hands…and mine by extension."

His eyes are flint and fire as he says, "Orochimaru was lost to Konoha long ago, consumed in his selfishness. Perhaps he was lost long before I was his teacher."

Sakura regards him, unsure of what to say. She cannot understand a loss like this: the loss of a person still living. What does one say when a friend becomes unrecognizable? She has no answers and that fact leaves her hollow. "You loved him," she says.

"Like my own son," he replies miserably.

Sakura moves closer to the man and wraps a tentative arm around him for comfort. They do not speak anymore. They sit in companionable silence as the fire burns down to flickering embers.

She may be silent, but Sakura's mind is alive and whirring with thoughts. How must it feel to pin your hopes, your dreams, your love on someone who throws it in your face? How had he missed the signs of Orochimaru's descent into madness? Sakura knows the answer to the second. He was
too close to the situation, blinded by his affection. Sakura hopes and prays to every god she can think of that she is not placed in a similar situation.

She does not know if she can make the right decision.

Their arrival to Suna is almost exactly opposite to their entrance to Kumo. The sun hangs low and heavy in the sky, blistering heat down upon their backs. It is a welcome change to the chill that was nestled away within Sakura's body in Kumo. Sakura can't say she cares for the overwhelming dryness that accompanies the heat.

Another change is the greeting they receive at the gates of Suna. The Suna gate guards snap to attention, greeting them cordially as they guide them through the gates after a brief, cursory glance at their passports. Their stance with the teacher/student duo is lax and, as they make their way toward the Kage Tower, they even crack a few jokes with each other. It is different even from her last visit to Suna.

Sakura smiles to herself, enjoying their camaraderie as an observer, but not as an outsider. Even in these scant months following the Konoha Crush, the relationship between Konoha and Suna is on the mend. Apparently, Sarutobi-sensei and Tsunade-hime's implementation of intergroup contact has been successful thus far.

Sakura listens as the chūnin guiding them host easy conversation, keeping her gaze upon her surroundings. Like all the other villages, Suna has its own, unique feel. The buildings are all cast in off-white tones, rounded and curved without any sharp angles. There is little in the way of metal within the village, though, considering the way her hitae-ate heats against her neck, Sakura thinks Suna is quite wise. The people they pass are dressed in thin layers, covering their faces and skin against the harshness of the sun.

It is apparent in everything, the climate, the architecture, and the people that the Suna is made of a hardy stock.

"We're going to need to go shopping again," Sakura murmurs to Sarutobi-sensei, already feeling her bare arms burning.

"You're right about that," one of the chūnin says, grinning at her. "You'll be far more than pink if you don't dress right."

"Stop by Basara-ōji's stall," another chimes in. "He's got the best quality cloaks and he'll cut you a discount if you flirt with him a bit."

"Sakura-chan's a bit young for that," Sarutobi-sensei replies severely.

"We were talking about you, Professor," the first chūnin says, keeping her face straight even as her fellow guards begin to chuckle.

Sakura joins in their laughter, enjoying the momentarily flummoxed expression on Sarutobi-sensei's face. Then he smiles, shaking his head as they reach the large, domed Kage Tower in the middle of Suna.

"Thank you for the advice," Sarutobi-sensei says, voice as dry as their surroundings. "We'll be stopping by Basara's stall and sampling his services."

"Don't sample too much!" one of them jibes, winking at Sakura when she flushes. "Basara-ōji will take advantage if he can."
"Duly noted," Sarutobi-sensei replies.

The Suna shinobi usher them indoors, their snickering petering off as their professionalism sets in. Sakura follows the chūnin through the building, noticing the way that some of the higher ranked nin pause and look at them before continuing their tasks. The chūnin stop before an oval-shaped door, knocking loudly.

"Come in!"

Sarutobi-sensei walks in first, as is befitting his rank as a former Kage. Sakura steps aside and allows the Suna shinobi to enter before her. She walks in last, taking her place at Sarutobi-sensei's shoulder.

Sakura is a bit surprised by the number of people within the office though, considering the fact that no one has officially been elected Kazekage, perhaps it shouldn't be. A large table has been set up for the time being in place of a desk. Two older individuals, around Sarutobi-sensei's age, sit at the head of the table. Gaara and his siblings have seats at the table, as does their teacher, Baki. The Kage Guard stands at attention along the walls, ready for anything.

"About time you arrived, Professor," the older woman says. "Take a seat."

"You've always been in the habit of being late," the man at her side adds. "Didn't even show up to the Second War on time."

"Chiyo, Ebizo," Sarutobi-sensei greets with a cordial smile, taking a seat and gesturing for Sakura to do the same. "I see the two of you have gotten old."

There is a moment of tense silence as everyone takes in Sarutobi-sensei's audacity. Though they do not move, Sakura can feel the sharpening of intent from the Guard. Chiyo and Ebizo look at each other, then to Sarutobi-sensei and begin to guffaw, full bellied laughter pouring from their lips.

"Have you seen a mirror recently, Hiruzen?" Chiyo asks. "You might not be so cocky."

"I've always been an old soul," Sarutobi-sensei replies. "It is good to see the two of you looking well."

"That's more than could be said for your student," Ebizo says. Sakura senses that, beneath his bushy eyebrows, he is staring at her. "Our sun seems to wilt you; your skin is burned."

"We've been referred to a stall within the village to rectify that," Sarutobi-sensei says. "Sakura-chan will be taken care of."

"Good. Sun poisoning, though a slower death than other poisons, is just as effective," Chiyo says, before casting her gaze around the room. "Now, I know your visit here is regarding an update on our current state of affairs. A date is set for the Trial of Wind. It will be the night of the new moon, a fortnight from today. Upon the completion of the Trial, we will have our new Kazekage." She nods toward the trio of siblings.

Sarutobi-sensei regards them, taking in their youth with a melancholy in his expression. "Are you prepared to take the Trial?" he asks. "I have heard tale of the requirements; some do not survive the encounter and none emerge unscathed."

Baki leans forward against the table, scowling at Sarutobi-sensei. "They are aware of the consequences as well as the rewards," he says, perceiving Sarutobi-sensei's question as a challenge. "The nin of Suna are hardy, sturdy folk; they can last through the possible dangers and destruction
caused by wind."

"As an outsider you will be unable to participate in the Trial itself," Ebizo says. "However, as our ally in this, we would appreciate your presence during the ceremonies leading up to and following the Trial."

"It will mark a new era for Suna and Konoha," Gaara says, speaking abruptly but purposefully. Sakura meets his direct gaze, heartened to see his drive. "In the Trial of the Wind we will reforge our bonds with Konoha stronger than before."

Temari and Kankuro look at Gaara, shocked for a moment before Kankuro gives a slow smile. "What he said."

"Of course," Sarutobi-sensei says, something soft in his eyes as he looks over the siblings. "We would be honored to participate in your ceremonies and rituals as you select a new Kazekage. I know that, doubtless of the outcome, Konoha will be proud to greet a strong leader."

"And we are glad to have Konoha as an ally," Temari says, inclining her head to Sarutobi-sensei. "Please, allow us to escort you to your residence for your stay here."

"We'll see you shortly, Hiruzen," Chiyo says in dismissal.

"Ah, Chiyo," Sarutobi-sensei says, as everyone begins to stand. "Might we be given passes to your greenhouses? I know you've encountered my student Sakura-chan before, as well as her budding enthusiasm for poisons. I know it would be quite a treat for her to see your veritable wealth of plants."

"Enough of the flattery. You may be called Silver Tongue, but it doesn't work on me," Chiyo says absently, attention focused on Sakura. She sizes Sakura up, assessing every inch of her. Sakura remembers the burn scuff on her shirt sleeve and wishes she changed shirts earlier. "Kankuro will get the two of you passes." She whirls on Kankuro, waving a finger in his face. "Access to the first, second, and fourth greenhouses only."

Kankuro snaps to attention. "Yes Chiyo-baasama, of course."

Sakura keeps herself from flinging herself upon Sarutobi-sensei in affection, but it is a close thing.

They are led from the Tower by the siblings and guided further into the governmental district. Sarutobi-sensei carries on a meandering conversation with the older two siblings, discussing the trade of grains in Suna. Sakura and Gaara walk side by side, silent and strained.

She doesn't know why it's so awkward, why things feel so odd...something is just off. They've written to each other a handful of times and there's something easy and unrestrained in their letters. Perhaps it's the fact that they have company listening in; perhaps it is the fact that they are now on his turf. Whatever it is, they are like two puzzle pieces that do not fit together.

"Here we are," Temari says, presenting the Konoha embassy.

Most people who stay here are important civilians: merchants, nobles, and the like. It shows in the sheer luxury of the building and environment. It is odd for ninja to stay in embassy suites, but Sakura, under the tutelage of Sarutobi-sensei, is getting used to being a trailblazer.

As they move to enter a hand clamps down on Sakura's wrist. Sakura jumps, following the hand up the arm into Gaara's eyes.
"Stay," he says, the word leaving his lips almost reluctantly. His brows furrow and his face contorts into a grimace.

Sakura glances at Sarutobi-sensei who is watching avidly. She nods, ignoring the wide smile he gives her as Gaara leads her away from the embassy by her wrist.

Sakura shakes her hand. Gaara pauses, looking at her with a bewildered, hurt expression. She smiles at him, kindness in her gaze as she gently takes his hand in hers, entwining their fingers together. Gaara's face softens as he looks down at their hands, before he leads onward.

Sakura notices that people give Gaara a wide berth. Now that she has visited Kumo, met Yugito and Bee, Sakura knows that there is another way for jinchūriki, a better way. They stop at perhaps the last place Sakura would consider a place of interest for Gaara: a shabby playground.

It seems rather abandoned and rundown, with little in the way of playground equipment. There are, however, a set of swings.

Gaara tromps over to one of the swings, offering it to Sakura. Sakura takes a seat, glancing askance at Gaara. Her hand is getting sweaty and the angle doesn't feel great on her wrist, but Gaara has yet to let her go. Knowing how little physical contact he receives, she leaves it be, allowing him to take affection as he needs.

"How are you?" Sakura asks, looking up and out at the sky.

It is already getting dark, dusk fully upon them. Sakura appreciates it, finding it a relief to the burning of her skin.

"I am well," Gaara says, taking peeks of her from the corners of his eyes. It is hard to believe that she is here right now, beside him, with him. The somewhat damp feel of her warm hand is physical proof of her existence and he is loath to release the lifeline. It tethers him, centers him. "I continue to train and meditate. Are you well?"

"I am," Sakura replies, turning a smile his way. "I'm glad for the warm weather here; it was absolutely freezing in Kumo."

"You smell different," Gaara says, hand spasming around hers. "You smell like a jinchūriki."

"I met two jinchūriki in Kumo," Sakura explains. "Gaara, they're amazing. Their names are Yugito and Killer Bee; they've forged bonds with their tailed beasts. They work together, they're partners in every sense of the word."

"Partners?" Gaara asks. "Their tailed beasts are willing to listen to them, bow to their orders?"

Sakura shakes her head. "They don't command the tailed beasts," she says, remembering how Yugito and Bee spoke of their unique relationships. "They treat them as equals, as friends." She winces as his grip tightens, knuckles turning white. "I know that Shukaku has been cruel to you, that he usurps power from you when you sleep. From what Yugito and Bee said, each relationship is different and unique. However, it is apparent that the relationship is all about trust."

"Trust?"

"I know it is difficult, but trust is the foundation to every relationship," Sakura says, observing Gaara's flummoxed expression. Her heart aches at his lack of this basic relational knowledge. How long has he lived like this, on the lonely outskirts of existence? "When you engage in friendship with someone, you offer them your trust. For example, I trust you."
"You trust me?" he whispers.

"Of course," Sakura says. "You trust me too." She gestures down to their entwined hands. "You took my hand and your sand did not rise to your defense. You trust me with skin-to-skin contact, that I will not harm you."

"You wouldn't," Gaara replies immediately.

The unwavering confidence in his voice softens Sakura's smile. "I know," she says gently. "You need to foster that same feeling between yourself and Shukaku. Just talk to him. Approach him with an open mind."

Gaara's brows furrow but he nods. "I am conflicted."

"Why?" Sakura asks.

"Participation in the Trial is mandatory and I do want to participate," Gaara begins, "however, I am concerned. It is my dream to be Kazekage, but I'm conflicted. I know that, in the past, I have encouraged feelings of fear and terror in them, but I do not want to do so anymore. I do not wish to kill my siblings in battle."

"You won't," Sakura says, squeezing his hand in comfort. "You've changed Gaara; grown. You've given your siblings your love; you will be able to stay your hand should you need to."

Gaara's lips quirk up slightly for a moment before falling away beneath a storm cloud of emotion. "I do not know if I should win," he confides. "I fear that I will not be a good leader."

"Gaara, the fact that you are even considering such questions makes it apparent that you will lead well. You know what it means to be reviled, to be hated. As Kazekage, you can reform Suna so that such things do not happen again in the future. You heard Sarutobi-sensei; any one of you will make an exemplary leader." She pauses, leaning forward toward Gaara conspiratorially. "That may be true, but I believe you will be the best."

Gaara turns her way fully, assessing her. "You truly believe that."

"Of course," Sakura says. "We will be staying for the inauguration ceremony. When you are appointed Kazekage, I will be in standing in the crowd, cheering you on." Her eyes crinkle upward as she grins. "There is no doubt in my mind."

Gaara takes a deep breath before standing abruptly, releasing her hand. Sakura watches him, confused as he moves around to stand in front of her. She stands from the swing, looking down into his determined gaze.

"I will do as you say," Gaara says. "I will speak with Shukaku tonight and begin the process of forging a friendship. I will partake in the Trial and I will win it."

"I will be Godaime Kazekage and usher in a new era for Sunagakure."

Sakura bounces on the balls of her feet, keeping herself from pacing. It is almost over: all the ceremonies and rituals leading up to the Trial. She's learned more about Suna in these past few days than she discovered in any of her Academy courses. The preference for spicy foods, the proclivity toward brilliantly white, light-weight clothing, and the almost sacred reverence of water
and the life it offers.

All that is left for her and Sarutobi-sensei is to wait upon the walls of Suna.

She fidgets with her headscarf, as green as the rest of her clothes. Everyone present for the Trial dresses in green to symbolize the renewal taking place. Whatever happens, Suna will gain a new Kazekage.

"Peace, Sakura-chan," Sarutobi-sensei says with a gentle look. "They will return soon."

"I know," Sakura says. "I know there's nothing I can do to speed things along, but waiting is even worse."

"Come and sit," Sarutobi-sensei says, patting beside him. "Take a few deep breaths and meditate. Reconnect with your chakra and rest. I will let you know when they arrive."

Sakura grudgingly sits beside Sarutobi-sensei and allows her training to kick in despite her reluctance. Indra and Ashura have taught her too well for her to skirt around meditation. She breathes deeply, allowing her thoughts to scatter as she falls within herself…

Moments later, Sarutobi-sensei fluctuates his chakra, nudging her to awareness. Sakura leaps to her feet as chakras begin to approach, straining to see the procession of Suna's people stream in through the gates. Leading the pack, legs shaky but steps firm, is Gaara. Over his pale green cloak he wears a sleeveless shimmering silver robe that glints and twinkles beneath the sun.

Sakura's chakra leaps as her heart swells with joy. At the spike, Gaara's eyes cut up in her direction and, even at this distance, she can see the triumphant smile upon his face.

She looks at Sarutobi-sensei who shakes his head. "Not yet, Sakura-chan," he says, amusement coloring his voice. "Gaara must greet his new people. We will not be involved until the celebration later tonight." Sakura's bottom lip pouts out. "I know it doesn't seem fair, but this is a special moment for Suna and Suna alone. You will get to congratulate with Gaara later."

Sakura nods, understanding the reason even if she hates it. She looks out at Gaara, waving to him for a moment. "I'll be going by the greenhouse," she tells Sarutobi-sensei. "Ino asked me in her last letter to get some clippings of the cacti so she can try to crossbreed them with Konoha succulents."

"Does Chiyo know you're taking them?" Sarutobi-sensei asks wryly.

Sakura shrugs. "There's a reason I'm only allowed access to some of the greenhouses and not all of them. She knows I'm a shinobi. Besides, she gave me a cactus last time. This is her way of doing it again."

Sarutobi-sensei’s laughter follows her as she leaves, making her way through the back streets of Suna to the greenhouses. She moves among the plants, breathing in the soil and the possibilities but her focus is on the sun, as she waits for time to pass.

Finally, it is time for the celebration. She beelines her way to the open air pavilion, where festivities are already underway. Sakura greets a few of the people she recognizes, seeking out Gaara in the chaos. He is, understandably, quite difficult to find.

Thankfully, she doesn't have to find him as he finds her.

The whisper of sand is the only forewarning Sakura receives before a hand clamps onto hers and suddenly she is standing in a different place. She stumbles, disoriented, for a moment, before
realizing that she is on the dome roof of a building near the pavilion.

She turns, cheeks aching with the force of her smile as she takes in her companion. "Congratulations Gaara! How do you feel?"

"Tired," Gaara says, voice hoarse. She knows he's spoken more today than he's used to. "Happy." He looks at her, worried. "Is it alright to be this happy?"

"Of course it is," Sakura replies. She looks at his new robe. "I like the new robe."

Gaara lifts it, a look of dissatisfaction in his eyes. "It glitters."

Sakura snorts, patting his hand between both of hers. "Don't ever change Gaara."

"I won't," he says. "As long as you don't change either."

"It's a promise," Sakura replies, looking out over the pavilion. "You're going to be a phenomenal leader," she says emphatically as she takes in the joy and celebration below. "You'll lead them fairly and strongly. They will love you."

Gaara stares at her for a long moment, something smoldering deep within his gaze, and Sakura worries that she has overstepped. Then Gaara shifts forward abruptly, wrapping his arms tightly around Sakura's back. She leans into his warmth, a relief from the chill setting in with the setting sun.

"Am I doing this right?" Gaara asks.

Sakura laughs, folding her arms around him in return. "Here," she says, guiding him to set his chin against her shoulder. Gaara's shoulders slump, melting into the hug. They stand in silence, just enjoying each other's embrace. "I'm going to miss seeing you daily."

"I can request that you be stationed here," Gaara says. "You can work as my Konoha liaison."

Sakura's shoulders shake with silent laughter. She didn't know that Gaara possessed such a sense of humor. "Isn't there someone who already holds that position?"

She can feel him shrug. "You'll replace him. I can do that; I'm the Kazekage."

"While I appreciate the generous offer," Sakura begins, "I'm afraid that I have a previous engagement with Sarutobi-sensei. Your current Konoha liaison can rest easy knowing I won't take their job."

Gaara sighs. "I'll miss you too. I cannot be this candid with others."

"That'll change," Sakura says. She thinks on the progress he's made toward amends with his siblings and with Shukaku. "It already is. Now you will have your whole village at your back."

Gaara pulls away from the hug, placing his hands on Sakura's shoulders. "Whatever happens, stay safe."

"I will," Sakura replies.

They stay side by side quietly, knowing that, in a day, they will be apart once more. Still, Sakura knows that their friendship transcends the boundaries of either of their villages.

She will see him again soon.
the contact hypothesis is a real concept, created by personality psychologist Gordon Allport. he was the first psychologist to examine prejudice and develop techniques for overcoming it that are still used today. honestly, his idea was a driving force in the integration of the school systems. pretty cool guy, had some interesting theories on religion as well.

-jay
chūnin part III

“Tell me about Iwagakure, Sakura,” Sarutobi-sensei says as they march on through the Land of Water.

“And here I thought you were the teacher,” Sakura replies, a teasing light in her eyes.

“This will give me an understanding of your knowledge, a foundation if you will,” he says, entering into his “Lecture Mode.” “Once I have a grasp of your knowledge, I can build upon it, strengthening the foundation and scaffolding upward from there.” He smiles. “Besides, it is good for me to hear your impressions as someone who has had limited interactions with the village. Perhaps it will offer me a general view of how your generation views Iwa.”

“Well, it’s an impression coming from a single, probably uninformed individual,” Sakura replies. “I don’t know if my views are generalizable to the rest of my generation.”

Sarutobi-sensei laughs, shaking his head with a twinkle in his eye. “Humor me.”

Sakura ponders for a moment before saying, “Well, the village is carved directly into the mountain range of Earth, meaning the buildings tend to be durable and sturdy. This is reflected in Iwa’s people, as most are more strong willed than even the stone that surrounds them.” Sakura bites her lip, eyes flicking up to Sarutobi-sensei’s impassive face. “They hold strong, undying convictions, which is why we’ve been at war with them twice in the past. Grudges run deep within the village.”

Sarutobi-sensei sighs, raking a hand through his hair. “Your general impressions are not too far off the mark. There was a time when peace existed between Konoha and Iwa, however, Madara Uchiha struck out at the nation in an unsanctioned attack. He blindsided them and cut through a third of their forces in that single, heinous attack. Iwa has never forgiven us. And as the blood continues to spill on each side, those grudges are further and further embedded into the nations.”

“You don’t think there can be peace?” Sakura asks, scrutinizing her teacher. His worn, craggy face is hard, reminiscent of the stone carving of him that stares out over Konoha. She thinks the resentment he speaks of runs both ways.

Sarutobi-sensei glances down at her, startled. “Well, we shall see. I certainly hope we can form a new treaty. As things stand, however,” He sighs, “well, at this point there is only room for hope.”

“And the Tsuchikage invited us?”

Sarutobi-sensei’s expression becomes more foreboding. “Indeed he did. We are the first outsiders to set foot in Iwagakure since the First World War.”

“That’s…that’s good right?”

Sarutobi-sensei hums, not replying. Sakura can tell that he is caught up in his thoughts, unable to see her at the moment.

Sakura swallows back her questions, keeping pace with Sarutobi-sensei as they move at a brisk rate through Water. There is a clinging humidity that Sakura is unused to, brought on by the boggy swamps that surround them. Again, she finds herself missing the heavy shade and light humidity of Konoha. More than that, she misses the sunny company and safe haven of her apartment. She gets
the impression from Sarutobi-sensei’s somber and withdrawn mood that company in Iwa will be distant if not downright hostile.

She hunches in on herself slightly, already missing their time in Kumo. She hopes that, much like Kumo, there will be people here willing to look beyond the differences between their nations. Sakura clutches the small packet of seeds given her by Akari and Shiki. She promised to bring them back to Konoha with her and plant them in her native soil. She won’t break that promise, even though it seems it will a few more months before that time.

“How cold will Iwa be?” Sakura asks, shedding the light coat she wears. Even in winter, this area of Water is hot and humid. “Will it be as bad as Kumo?”

“It is mountainous terrain,” Sarutobi-sensei says, hiding a smile behind his hand. He is well familiar with Sakura’s dislike of cold. “I would expect it to be nearly as cold as Kumo, especially since it is the middle of winter.”

“Joy,” Sakura says lightly, trying not to whine even as a frown settles on her features. “Something to look forward to, I suppose.”

Sakura’s breath catches, not only from the thinner air, but from the massive gates before them. They are stone and appear to be carved directly from a mountainside, stretching high above them into the clouds. Sakura suddenly understands how Iwa managed to be so reclusive a nation for so many decades. She doubts a frontal assault would ever bring these gates or the surrounding walls down.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Sarutobi-sensei murmurs, eyes trained on a few notches high in the gates. His face is unreadable. “The only offensive approach to such a nation is aerial.”

Sakura glances at her teacher in her periphery, hating the chill that settles into her skin at those words.

Still, she isn’t given a chance to respond as one of the notches slides open wider and an individual clothed in crimson jumps out. Sakura is entranced as the person extends what appears to be a kite, gliding with unerringly accuracy down toward them. About ten feet off the ground, the person snaps the glider shut and flips neatly forward, landing easily before them.

The glider is a tall, stout woman. Her appearance screams no-nonsense, from her unwrinkled, comfortable dark trousers and coat to her short bob of blonde hair. The only thing unkempt about her is the burn scar gouged from one ear down to her chin. The scar crosses her lips, leaving peeled back pocks that show her teeth, even with a closed mouth. Currently, her lips are pursed in a near grimace as she takes in their brilliantly colored Kumo outerwear and Konoha hitai-ate.

Sarutobi-sensei produces his papers, though the woman only takes a cursory glance at them.

“We’ve been expecting you,” she says, sounding pained. She turns back toward the gate. “Open up!”

Sakura and Sarutobi-sensei flinch at her chakra-enhanced voice, but the woman only smiles grimly at them and keeps her gaze on the gate.

Nothing happens for a long moment.
Then, slowly, the gates begin to groan and creak apart. They do not swing inward or outward as normal gates are wont to do. Instead, the gates raise straight up. Sakura glances to Sarutobi-sensei for explanation and he smiles, tapping his temple with a single finger.

Sakura frowns, extending her chakra senses. She can see the flow of chakra through the gate, moving through the stone as if it were a living being of some sort, following the veins of stone as easily as chakra channels. The chakra belongs to a multitude of people and Sakura cannot sort them out individually, though it feels as if most of the chakra is remnants from people who have come before.

“Knock that off, Haruno,” the woman says gruffly. Her right hand fidgets, though she abstains from pulling free one of her numerous hidden blades. “No unsanctioned usage of chakra here in Iwagakure.”

“You have us at disadvantage,” Sarutobi-sensei says, nodding in agreement with the woman’s order. “You know our names yet we know not yours.”

Her lips twitch. “You have the illustrious honor of addressing Kamizuru Mitsubachi.” Something about her tone sounds bitter.

Sarutobi-sensei and Sakura both bow slightly to her. “Are you to direct us to the offices of Tsuchikage?” Sarutobi-sensei inquires.

“Indeed,” Mitsubachi replies, before smirking. “Do try to keep up.”

And off she goes, moving without reserve or hesitation beneath the massive gates into what lays beyond. Sarutobi-sensei nudges Sakura in the shoulder. She glares at him, but he only does it again, smiling as she moves forward, keeping her eyes on the gate hovering above them. Despite her nervousness, Sakura is in awe of the sheer mass and incredible display of chakra control. The gate is thick, stretching a full mile from end to end. Now that she is beneath it, Sakura is better able to make out the chakra construction that went into the development of this mechanism. It is a network, a patchwork quilt of generations of Iwa nins’ chakra.

It is a legacy unto itself.

“This is amazing,” Sakura whispers, almost disappointed as they emerge on the other side.

“You haven’t even seen Iwagakure yet,” Mitsubachi says, amused.

Sakura turns her gaze away from the gate, taking in the village sprawling before her.

It, much like the gate, was carved from the very mountains it was built within, buildings flitting in and out of the mountainside. All of the buildings loomed high in the air, scraping the sky with their height. Bridges of stone connected the different buildings and, it appeared, there were balconies on various floors where all of the foot traffic took place. From the ground, all of the people milling about appeared to be bustling ants, but even from this distance Sakura could make out the multicolored kites that many of them carried, similar in nature to Mitsubachi’s. Some unfurl the kites like wings, gliding to and fro from tall buildings to shorter ones. The whole village bustles with lively energy and, for a moment, Sakura feels a breathlessness that has little to do with the thinness of air.

“Come along,” Mitsubachi says, shattering Sakura’s focus.

Sakura shakes her head somewhat wryly at her own distraction, following the path that Mitsubachi weaves through the crowds. Mitsubachi cuts a proud figure, chin high and eyes flinty even in the
Sakura realizes with a start that the job of escorting two Konoha shinobi to the Tsuchikage is likely considered scut work.

Still Mitsubachi does not let on if her current position is getting to her as they make their way to the tallest building in the village. Sakura and Sarutobi-sensei submit their documents for inspection before removing any and all weaponry they wear. Sakura reluctantly unbraids her hair, removing the band of spikes interwoven among the strands. She smooths a finger across the tarnished, nicked metal before passing it on to a stoic-faced Iwa chūnin. She twists her hair up into a bun, trying to ignore the feeling she gets that she’s naked with little success.

Sarutobi-sensei’s quiet company is a balm to her senses, though the thoughtful frown that seems carved into his expression troubles her. This isn’t the time to address it though.

After a long and intense inspection, Mitsubachi leads them on to the upper floors. With every step, Sarutobi-sensei’s frown appears to deepen and, for perhaps the first time, Sakura finds herself concerned about the outcome of the talk they’re about to have. There’s something about Sarutobi’s relationship with the Tsuchikage that is worrying, though she knows little about their personal relations. All she knows is that Konoha and Iwa have far too often found themselves on opposite sides of the battlefield, though the same can be said regarding Konoha and Kumo.

Not for the first time, she wishes that Indra and Ashura were present if for nothing else but to keep her from worrying unnecessarily.

To keep from fidgeting with her hands, Sakura’s eyes sweep around their surroundings as Mitsubachi guides them up to the Tsuchikage’s chambers. Aside from the brilliant vermilion of the Iwa nin uniforms, the environment is decorated in somber, dark tones. Sakura notes that many pieces of furniture are carved of stone, rather than wood; some even seeming to be carved directly from the building itself. It is an interesting style, different than any Sakura has seen in the past. The rooms are brightened and illuminated by multifaceted, flashy clusters of crystal that glow from within. Sakura wishes to stop and examine one, but Mitsubachi hurries them along until they stand before a large stone door.

“One moment,” Mitsubachi says, stepping forward and banging the knocker shaped like a lion’s head.

The sound reverberates through the chamber and all falls silent. Mitsubachi steps back alongside them, expectant. Then the door rumbles and sinks into the ground as a booming voice calls from within, “Come in.”

Sakura follows half a step behind Sarutobi-sensei and Mitsubachi, partially out of respect and partially because she is distracted by the mechanics of the door. How on earth did it do that?

The first thing that registers with Sakura regarding the Tsuchikage is surprise.

The man is quite short.

The stories Sarutobi-sensei and other war veterans told painted a picture of a man of A or Bee’s stature, though the furrow between heavy brows and blazing eyes tell Sakura that this man is not to be trifled with. The stubborn jut to his jaw informs her just how he has gone toe to toe with so
many legends throughout his lifetime, all while holding his Kage-ship. Kamizuru Onoki is nothing and everything like she expected.

Their first meeting goes something like this:

“Thank you Mitsubachi, that’ll be all.” The woman bows and Sakura realizes with a start that the two of them are related somehow, though the way Onoki keeps his gaze solely trained on Sarutobi-sensei doesn’t reveal anything about the depths of their kinship. “I wasn’t sure you’d come, Hiruzen,” Onoki says gruffly, hands folded in place in front of him.

“You invited me,” Sarutobi-sensei replies. “I know how high an honor it is.”

Sakura keeps her expression schooled, despite her bewilderment over the way Sarutobi-sensei toes the line of decorum with the irreverence in his tone.

Onoki snorts, before his eyes flash to Sakura. “I see you’ve taken students again. Hoping for another Yellow Flash?”

“You know as well as I that Namikaze Minato was a student of Jiraiya,” Sarutobi-sensei replies. “And Jiraiya was a student of yours,” Onoki snipes back, gaze intent on Sakura. “Do you know the legacy you inherit; the lives extinguished in the name of your Will of Fire?”

“Sakura knows the costs that come of being a shinobi,” Sarutobi-sensei says, voice harder than she’s ever heard it. “I don’t know what education shinobi receive in Iwa, but in Konoha, they go in as prepared as they can.”

“And were you prepared, girl?” Onoki asks. “I had genin in your chūnin exam; they returned with talk of a pink-haired girl with oddly soft values for one who chooses this life.”

Sakura glances at Sarutobi-sensei who nods in turn. “I am prepared to do right by my nation,” she says dutifully. “The exam asked that I attack a fellow Konoha shinobi for the sport of others and advancement of myself. I was unwilling to do so. In the ensuing attack on Konoha by Oto and Suna, however, I displayed my preparation.”

Onoki regards her, expressionless before a slow smirk draws the corners of his lips. “You had a hand in subduing the One Tailed Beast once its jinchūriki lost control.” He states this easily, as if the ability to pry into the life of one lowly chūnin from another nation is an ordinary thing. And perhaps it is. Not for the first time, Sakura wonders at what it takes to play the political games and machinations of Kages. “Quite impressive work. Still, the name you received during the exams, Pacifist Ninja, will continue to follow you, probably throughout your entire career.” He smiles at Sarutobi-sensei and it is a threatening baring of teeth. “Your teacher can tell you the best way to handle the name-calling; he’s guided many students through it in the past.”

Onoki stands abruptly, clapping his hands. Two shinobi appear at his side. “Guide Hiruzen-sama and Haruno-san to their lodgings. Hiruzen, I will see you at dinner in a few days.” The shinobi begin leading them to the door. “Make sure to stay hydrated; it can be quite difficult dealing with this climate.”

The two shinobi guide them into a separate room of the tower, plain and sparse in decoration aside from a folding screen placed against the wall.

“We will need to seal your chakra,” one of them says, lifting a brush and inkwell. “It is a necessary precaution.”
“One that the Tsuchikage undoubtedly stipulated in our visit and forgot to tell us,” Sarutobi-sensei says, pensive as he looks over the seemingly innocuous writing utensils. “Very well. I suppose both of you are skilled in the art of fuinjutsu?”

“Of course,” the woman says, taking a pot of ink from her partner and glancing at Sakura. “Follow me please.”

After Sarutobi-sensei nods his assent, Sakura follows the woman, assisting her in setting up the screen to divide the room. They unroll a sheet across the ground and Sakura takes a seat upon it, watching as the woman sets about mixing the ink.

“That isn’t ordinary ink is it?” Sakura asks, concentrating on the bottle. The ink within thrums with energy, akin to chakra and yet…not.

“Keen eye,” the woman replies with a slight smile as she keeps her focus on her task. “The sealing of chakra is a dangerous and risky process when it comes to trained shinobi. You’ve honed your stores of chakra, growing them beyond their beginning means. Sealing wouldn’t do much to someone who does not manipulate chakra, but for someone who does…well, completed improperly it can result in death.”

“That’s reassuring,” Sakura says, paling at the potential ramifications.

The woman laughs. “That’s why the ink used is crucial. It has to be something that is able to withstand the movement of chakra while not being rigid; it has to flex along with your chakra while keeping it contained. That’s why its essence seems to move; it mirrors the fluctuations of chakra.” She places her mixing utensil to the side and picks up the brush. “Perfect. Now we can get underway.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“If you would remove your shirt?” the woman asks. “And lay on your stomach. I need access to your torso and up from there. If you’d also lay your arms flat against the floor, palms facing up, I will be able to complete this at a quicker pace.”

Sakura nods, methodically shedding the layers until she is bare to the woman’s gaze. She folds her clothes, unconcerned with the woman seeing the scars marring her flesh. They are evidence of battles fought and won, to be seated here, still alive.

The woman’s eyes are kind as Sakura does so. “I’m afraid I haven’t introduced myself Haruno-san, I am Michiru.”

“I think we can afford first name basis, Michiru-san,” Sakura says, smiling. “You do have me in an exposed position.”

“I am honored with your display of vulnerability, Sakura-san,” Michiru replies.

Feeling a bit better about the situation, Sakura prostrates herself, laying her arms out to her side as she waits for her chakra to be sealed. She resists the urge to flinch as the wet brush tickles the nape of her neck, flourishing outward to her shoulder and down past her elbow to the inlay of her wrist.

To the credit of Michiru’s skills, her brush does not lift from Sakura’s skin once, keeping the line smooth and unbroken across her flesh. The brush withdraws and Michiru begins again at Sakura’s nape and trailing down over her shoulder blade to her hip bone. Sakura closes her eyes and does what she can to relax, anticipating with every stroke the loss of her power.
And yet, when Michiru finally pulls away, task complete, Sakura feels no different.

She frowns, sitting up and retreating into herself. It is a trick all shinobi learn during their time at the Academy, to map out the borders of energy bottled within their own flesh. Some hone it even further, becoming sensor nin to pick up shifts in the chakra of the others. Sakura is content with knowing herself.

She is greeted by a veritable sea of energy, bounding and fluctuating as it usually does, but when she reaches out to grasp it, to mold it, it peels away from her.

Sakura frowns, concentrating further. Her chakra roils in turn, spiking in response to her focus. She’s so close; if she could only touch it...

She suddenly snaps back to herself, feeling bereft and adrift.

“IT takes some getting used to,” Michiru says, sympathetic as she pats Sakura’s hand. She passes Sakura a stack of tags covered in obscure symbols. “These can be used to unseal your chakra. Only individuals keyed into the seal--myself, Tsuchikage-sama, his officers--can unlock the seal. If you enter one of the regulated training grounds, a sentry can unseal you while you are on the grounds.”

Sakura glances over her shoulder, looking at the brilliant blue ink on her skin. “Will this wash away when I shower?”

“The lines will remain intact,” Michiru explains. “When you leave Iwagakure, you will be unsealed.”

“Thank you, Michiru-san,” Sakura says.

“It has been my pleasure,” Michiru says, gathering her supplies.

“What is your history with Tsuchikage-sama?” Sakura asks when they finally retire to their rooms.

Sarutobi-sensei does not immediately respond, instead withdrawing a seal from his bag and slapping it to the door frame. “There are ears everywhere and tongues all too quick to speak.”

Sakura flushes at the gentle admonishment, but she still listens expectantly as she begins unpacking her bags. The quarters provided by the Tsuchikage are luxurious, consisting of large suites for both of them, connected by a single door.

“Onoki and I have seldom met in person,” Sarutobi-sensei begins. “Only at functions attended by all of the Kages. However, we are more than familiar with one another’s battle strategies. Helming multiple wars against each other, both official and covert will do that.”

Sakura pauses in refolding her clothes, scrutinizing Sarutobi-sensei. “You and Raikage-sama have been on opposite sides of the battlefield on numerous occasions, yet you were able to act cordially, even genially with him while we were in Kumo.”

Sarutobi-sensei sighs, shaking his head. “I’m afraid you’ve spent too much time with me if you’re able to pick up my tells so easily.” He takes a seat in one of the chaise longues, gesturing to another for Sakura. “Come and sit. I will do what I can to summarize decades of enmity between Onoki and myself.”
Sakura gingerly settles herself into the strange seat, a combination of a chair and sofa, reclining as Sarutobi-sensei draws his pipe free of his bags. She watches as he stuffs it with a blend of vanilla, cinnamon, and tobacco; a sweet, sticky scent Sakura innately associates with him.

“It began shortly after I assumed the mantle of Hokage,” Sarutobi-sensei begins, eyes distant and focused on the spiralling smoke. “Tobirama-sama was killed by Kinkaku of Kumo. Shortly before his passing, he bestowed the title of Hokage upon me. Konoha was...weak in the ensuing chaos wrought by Kumo’s guerilla tactics. I was not adequately equipped to lead and it led to heavier losses than it should have.

“It presented the perfect opportunity to Iwa, to Onoki. You’ve seen their terrain; it is harsh, difficult to sustain a robust agriculture. Iwa depends heavily on importing its goods from other nations, as does Suna. Konoha, with its lush and fertile land, is a bounty to scavengers. Onoki preyed upon our time of turmoil and sparked the Second Shinobi World War.”

Sakura’s brow wrinkles. “That war involved Amegakure and Sunagakure as well; that’s where Tsunade-sama and Chiyo-sama’s rivalry began. It wasn’t just Konoha and Iwa.”

“But Iwa started it. Onoki sent patrols along our borders, picking off caravans and lower-ranked teams.” Sarutobi-sensei’s face is wan and pale. “He sent assassins after clan children. By the end of the Second War, some of the bloodlines of smaller clans were completely destroyed. Suna and Ame joined the fray more from proximity than from greed.

“Konoha was not the only nation hurt by the War. The land of Ame was left devastated and has yet to recover to its former glory. Suna lost many great shinobi and its economy was left in tatters as all trade routes were cut off by Konoha and Iwa. Iwa, while damaged, was left more or less intact, its economy sustained by its relationship with Kumo.

“I was not all that surprised when, a generation later, Iwa sprung an attack on us through Kusagakure. Onoki’s battle tactics were underhanded and ruthless, leading to the losses of many of the best and brightest of the generation that came before you,” Sarutobi-sensei says, lips pulled down by the weight of the memories. “Onoki instigated attacks from Kumo and Kiri against us as they saw our vulnerability and attempted to take advantage. Some attempts succeeded, others did not.

“However, we persisted and sustained. Finally, after years of heavy losses and locked in a perpetual stalemate, Onoki agreed to a peace treaty. He was reluctant but, with the Kamizuru clan fading from grace, he had little choice. His people wanted peace and he had to abide their terms or abdicate.”

Sarutobi-sensei’s eyes flash with contempt. “Even during this time of peace, Onoki has manipulated events and attacks against other nations from behind the scenes. His thirst for conquest has not faded, he has just relegated it to subtlety.”

“So why come?” Sakura asks, stunned by the firsthand account of history dropped upon her. “If Tsuchikage-sama is as devious as you say, as malicious and conniving, why come and willingly seal your chakra?”

“He invited us,” Sarutobi-sensei replies simply, casting his gaze out the window. The sun begins to set across the mountain range, a sight of transient, fleeting beauty. “Onoki has not brought an outside within these walls since his ascension to Kageship. I could not let the opportunity pass.” He pats her hand. “We are not in any true danger here; we are far too public figures for Onoki’s tastes. Konoha is strong, thriving despite the Konoha Crush. He is too cautious to risk that. No, Onoki is planning something different. I am more than able to wait him out.”
Sakura glances at her teacher, taking in his solemn profile. She wonders if he realized how similarly he described his purpose and Onoki’s past behaviors. She doubts that he catches the comparison, lost in smoke and memories as he is.

Sakura glances down at her hands, frowning at the way they quiver.

Opportunity indeed.

Sakura shifts her weight from foot to foot as she waits in the line to be announced. When the Tsuchikage mentioned dinner, she thought it would be a small affair, especially with the way he presented it as a casual afterthought.

She is quite wrong however as it appears that everyone in Iwa showed up to this event. She smooths the shimmery periwinkle folds of her dress, glad now that she wore it. It was left in her rooms while she went out and explored, apparently a gift from the Tsuchikage. While the flowy material allows space for weaponry, Sakura wears none, possesses none, something that leaves her feeling naked.

Already the air crackles with tension as Sarutobi-sensei stands stiff and impassive in front of her. As the guest of honor, he will be the first called, shadowed by his student second.

As Sakura observes the others in line, she cannot help but wonder if Sarutobi-sensei going first is a ploy to impress him as he will hear the names and titles of these powerful Iwa people firsthand. She certainly feels small and dowdy among these people.

“All will be well, Sakura-chan,” Sarutobi-sensei says, catching her discomfiture. “This engagement is a formality; people will loosen up the longer we are here.”

Sakura nods, relaxing her hands. She looks past him, sighing as the cryer gestures for Sarutobi-sensei. “If you need to find me, I’ll be hovering near the horderves.”

Sarutobi-sensei chuckles, shoulders relaxing for what seems to be the first time since they entered Iwa. “I am glad you are here with me, Sakura-chan. I’ll see you shortly.”

Sakura watches him go before taking a deep breath to steady herself.

She just hopes that she’ll manage the introduction without making an embarrassment of herself.

However, it is not during her presentation that such a scene occurs. No, it is while she stands outside on a balcony.

It happens something like this:

Sakura is thankful that she is a nobody, even as a foreigner. Her clan is not recognizable and her chūnin rank, while nothing to scoff at, is nothing for those present to fear. She sticks to the fringes, observing as Sarutobi-sensei engages in conversation with the crowd. Most conversations seem more debate than conversation, but at least they are not snubbing him.

Seeing that Sarutobi-sensei is in his element, Sakura gathers up her plate and steps out onto one of the numerous balconies that open off the room. She leans her elbows against the stone railing, looking out over Iwa. Lights twinkle in the growing darkness as Sakura realizes that people have rigged lights along their gliders.
She bites into the rich dish called cheese curds, watching as people flit around from building to building in the distance. Iwa has a thriving night life and Sakura appreciates the thrum of music that carries up from the village to the balcony.

Her shoulders slump and, for the first time since her chakra was sealed, Sakura relaxes.

“Is Iwa not to your liking?”

Sakura flinches, turning toward the speaker as she fights to keep a guilty look off her face. The speaker is a young woman, a year or so older than Sakura. Her dark hair is shaped into a stylish bob and her eyebrows quirk in challenge.

“On the contrary,” Sakura replies, “I was just taking in Iwa’s beauty.”

The woman smirks, coming up to perch against the ledge. Her beaded green sheath dress rides up her leg, showcasing the flat blade tucked right above her knee. Sakura eyes the knife discreetly, wistful.

“How does it compare to your other travels? Do Kumo’s mountains compare?” she asks.

“I appreciated the snow,” Sakura says. “However, your mountain range is certainly more expansive and grand.”

“Of course,” she says, mouth tilting in a victorious smile. “I expected nothing less.”

Sakura inclines her head, choosing not to respond as she eats more curds. She isn’t sure what the girl’s angle is, but she knows to tread lightly here.

“How do you manage it?” the girl asks.

“Manage what?”

“Traveling with that monster,” she says, pink eyes flashing with contempt as she stares into the room.

Sakura follows her gaze, finding Sarutobi-sensei standing in the middle of a group. They are older, perhaps a generation after Sarutobi-sensei. Whoever they are, they laugh outright at whatever it is that he is saying and Sakura warms with fondness and pride for her teacher.

“Are you speaking of Sarutobi-sensei?” Sakura asks. “He’s no monster.”

The girl scoffs. “Do you know nothing? He’s a coldblooded killer.”

Sakura snorts. “He’s shinobi, born and bred. Of course he’s a killer.”

“Not like this. There is honor in battle, in engaging the martial arts against a worthy opponent,” she says, voice filling with passion. “There is no honor for one who hides behind others; one who sends others to complete his work for him.”

“That is a sacrifice made of any who ascend to the role of Kage,” Sakura replies.

“Not Onoki,” the girl says, irreverent. “He joins the squads whenever he can; he remains the strongest, the most indomitable shinobi in the village. He refuses to pass on the mantle to anyone weaker than he is. Sarutobi is soft-hearted; too weak-willed to lead with conviction. He remained passive in the face of atrocities committed within his own village. There’s a reason he passed his title on to another.”
“You’re wrong,” Sakura says. “Sarutobi-sensei possesses a kind heart but it is what allows him to meet and engage others openly and without reserve. Tsuchikage-sama has isolated himself from the strength of others with his actions.”

“You’re a fool,” the girl says, shifting into Sakura’s space. Sakura realizes that the girl is a few inches shorter than she is. “Do you know how the Third War ended? Sarutobi sent a student, barely a man to fight alone. He slaughtered over a thousand Iwa shinobi in battle, effectively forcing Onoki’s hand to sign a treaty around duress.”

“It was war,” Sakura bites back, unable to hide the scorn in her voice. “A war started by Onoki. Your Tsuchikage may be willing to start fights, but Sarutobi-sensei is willing to do what is necessary to end them.”

The girl’s features contort in anger and her hand twitches toward the blade at her leg. Sakura immediately reaches for a kunai, fumbling as she comes up short. Her cheeks blaze with embarrassment as the girl begins to laugh, hands falling back to her sides.

“You’ve been neutered,” the girl says, her voice loud enough to carry to the party within. “You willingly laid down your arms and your chakra.” She clicks her tongue in disgust. “Your words mean nothing to me. I am Kamizuru Kurotsuchi and I will surpass my grandfather’s greatness and bring Iwa to the forefront of the nations. You, Haruno Sakura, will undoubtedly fade in obscurity, a subpar ninja from a no-name clan.”

So saying Kurotsuchi turns on her heel, moving gracefully back toward the party. She pauses, throwing Sakura a look over her shoulder. “If you choose to learn your history, ask Sarutobi about Namikaze Minato, the Yellow Flash. And ask him about the twisted Roots that run through your village. There is evil lurking in those shadows.”

And she saunters off, leaving Sakura with an empty plate and a high flush of humiliation across her cheeks. She turns stiffly back to the skyline of Iwa, finding it all much less inviting than before.

Not for the first time, Sakura aches for Konoha, missing it like a phantom limb.

“I’m here to escort you around the village,” Kurotsuchi says, the words coming from her lips reluctantly. Her face twists as if she bites into something sour. “I’ll give you a tour.”

Sakura blinks at Kurotsuchi, looking beyond her to see if there is anyone else with her. Kurotsuchi dresses now in the standard Iwa shinobi gear with a blue glider attached to a holster at her back.

“Escort me?” Sakura asks, aware that she sounds like a simpleton, repeating Kurotsuchi as she is. “I got the impression last night that you can’t stand me.”

“I can’t,” Kurotsuchi rushes to assure her. “However, Onoki-oji caught wind of our exchange last night and commanded that I make reparations.”

“It’s really not necessary,” Sakura says.

“His will is indomitable. If he wants me to guide you around the village, I will guide you around the village.” Kurotsuchi rolls hers eyes, gaze flicking beyond her shoulders. “He has two agents tailing me right now and probably throughout the day to make sure we keep up appearances.”

Sakura reaches out her senses, wilting as she is reminded, yet again, that she is currently incapable.
Instead, she steps back and allows Kurotsuchi into her suite before going to change into warm, sensible clothing. She glances at her olive green Konoha gear, knowing that it would fit in well among the drab, somber colors of Iwa. Then she looks to the magenta winter gear purchased in Kumo that clashes marvelously with her hair.

She ponders for only a moment before grinning.

“You’re wearing that?” Kurotsuchi asks, scandalized as Sakura emerges from her room.

“We’re nearly matching,” Sakura points out, keeping her tone innocent and reasonable.

“It’s hideous.”

“I’m sure the people of Kumo would love to hear your feedback, alas they are not here,” Sakura says, toeing into her shoes. “Are you ready?”

Kurotsuchi regards her and Sakura is briefly reminded of a cat or perhaps Indra. Her heart squeezes but she shrugs it off as Kurotsuchi heads out the door, leading Sakura into the streets of Iwa.

There are few people down on their level but, as Sakura looks up to the sky, she can see it bustles with all sorts of air traffic.

“Who started the gliding tradition?” Sakura asks as they set off down a path. She doesn’t question it; Kurotsuchi seems to know where she is going and Sakura doesn’t mind being led around. She’ll have time to explore on her own later.

“It’s been around since the founding of the village,” Kurotsuchi replies tersely. “It’s a convenient method of travel among buildings of uneven height. Those shinobi who possess air techniques can generally maneuver even better.”

“Do you possess such techniques?”

“Like I’d tell you,” Kurotsuchi says. “I prefer leaving my secrets as such when it comes to potential enemies.”

Sakura’s breath catches, surprise a dagger in her chest. “You expect to one day meet me on the battlefield?”

Kurotsuchi’s steps falter, perhaps catching the waver in Sakura’s voice. She throws Sakura an inscrutable look. “Onoki-oji gets his way, one way or another. I’m sure Sarutobi has his speculations.”

Sakura does not reply, subdued as they continue on. Is war truly so likely an outcome? Kurotsuchi certainly seems to think so, regarding it not as a possibility but an inevitable outcome. Still, Sakura hopes for change, the sort of change she saw in Kumo and Kiri. It is change that Sarutobi-sensei believes in with all his being. He knows they cannot keep running in the circles they do, shifting from peace to war at the drop of a hat. Something has to give along the way. The changes she and Sarutobi-sensei wrought were small, minute even but Sakura knows the ripples are there and still shifting the murky waters.

Perhaps…

Perhaps Iwa can be included in this change.

It is as she is caught in these thoughts that Sakura encounters her fifth jinchūriki.
Kurotsuchi comes to a halt, cursing under her breath. Sakura, entangled as she is in her thoughts, carelessly bumps into her back. She stops, rubbing her nose as she peeks around Kurotsuchi. Her eyes go wide.

The most massive man she has ever seen, larger even than Hoshigaki Kisame by over a foot, stands uncomfortably close to Kurotsuchi. He is dressed in heavy armor, the only portion of his skin exposed around his brilliant red eyes. Eyes that are focused unerringly on Sakura.

Sakura gulps, fingers flexing instinctively for a kunai only to come up empty.

“What do you want, Han?” Kurotsuchi demands as the two agents trailing them appear beside Kurotsuchi.

They stand casually, hands nowhere near their weapons as they regard Han.

“I just wish to speak to the young lady,” Han says, voice rumbling through his chest. “If that is alright by you?” he asks, directing the question at Sakura.

She keeps her chin high, hating how vulnerable she feels. “Certainly. How may I help you?”

He moves around Kurotsuchi, coming to a stop before Sakura. Without even trying to he looms above her, though he bends to regard her more closely. “I am Han,” he says, offering her his hand. His eyes crinkle upward, an expression that, from her experience with Kakashi-sensei, tells Sakura he is smiling. “You are quite interesting.”

“I am Haruno Sakura,” she replies, clasping hands with him. His hand swamps hers, but he gives it a brisk, efficient shake before withdrawing. “I am afraid I don’t know anything about being interesting.”

“Quite interesting indeed,” Han says. “I recognize some scents you wear; most recently of Shukaku, Matatabi, and Gyuki.” He sniffs, eyes shutting. “It is wearing away, but I smell Kurama too.”

Sakura laughs, relief flooding her. “I was in Suna recently, Kumo as well.” She taps her hitai-ate. “I’m from Konoha originally.”

“And you so willingly associate with jinchūriki?” Han asks, something in his voice sounding wistful. “It says something of your quality that you have garnered the attention of so many jinchūriki.”

Sakura shrugs, hating the way that Kurotsuchi looks at her, evaluating her. “They are wonderful people,” Sakura replies, as much to Han as to the judgment in Kurotsuchi’s face. “Truly, some of the strongest shinobi I have ever met are jinchūriki. I am honored to call them my friends.”

Han smiles down at her before his eyes flick to their growing audience. His expression immediately shutsters, going blank and clear. Sakura, reminded of Naruto and Gaara, forces her hands to remain at her sides. She doubts he would appreciate the comfort of a stranger, even one who knows other jinchūriki.

“I truly appreciate your time, Sakura,” Han says, bowing to her. “I will not keep you any longer. I will see you soon.”

Sakura watches as he heads off into the crowd, fading into the shadows far too easily for such a large man. Sakura returns her gaze to Kurotsuchi as the crowd begins to disperse, ignoring her pursed lips.
“Lead on.”

Sakura settles onto one of the chaise lounges, used now to the furniture. She picks up her bowl of noodles, inhaling the spicy scent of chili peppers and garlic. She regards her teacher, passing him the other bowl. He takes it, sighing as he catches sight of the flecks of pepper within. He doesn’t handle the spiciness all that well.

“How are the meetings going?” she asks, taking in his subdued, almost muted posture.

“As well as can be expected,” Sarutobi-sensei replies, grimacing as he takes a bite. “Which is to say, not all that well.” Sakura makes a noise of sympathy, slurping up a mouthful of noodles. “Onoki is just as hard headed as I remembered, as are his councilmen.”

“Do you see anything coming out of these talks?” Sakura asks.

“I am not sure,” Sarutobi-sensei says. “Perhaps. Only time will tell. At least discussions have been started. Sometimes that is the hardest part.” He shakes himself from his thoughts, giving Sakura a warm smile. “And how are your explorations of Iwa going? Is Kurotsuchi a good guide?”

“She’s a good guide,” Sakura replies, hedging around the abrasive bits of Kurotsuchi’s personality. “She’s certainly passionate about Iwa and more than willing to share.”

Sarutobi-sensei chuckles. “The Kamizuru are a proud clan, uncompromising in their loyalty to Iwa. If she is anything like her grandfather I’m sure it’s been a taxing business. Thank you for handling it so diplomatically.”

Sakura glances down into her bowl, absently twirling her chopsticks through the noodles. “Actually, she mentioned something to me the other day, something that I’ve heard before.”

“What is it, Sakura-chan?”

Sakura looks up, meeting Sarutobi-sensei’s gaze. She needs to gauge his expression as she says this. “Kurotsuchi brought up some of our actions during the Third Shinobi World War. But she said something specific…she mentioned the ‘twisted Roots’ that run beneath Konoha.”

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“Why did this stick out to you?” Sarutobi-sensei asks, voice veering on the edge of sharp.

“I’ve heard whispers of it around the village,” Sakura says, choosing not to mention the information Indra and Ashura gathered when others were speaking. No one tried to hide things from ghosts. “Sai-chan is someone in the Root program, isn’t he?”

“This is not the place to discuss the matter,” Sarutobi-sensei says, body turned away from Sakura. “One day Sakura, we will have a conversation about the necessary vices to keep a village happy and thriving. Today is not that day.”

He stands, moving into his bedroom, effectively slamming the door on the conversation.

Sakura remains on the chaise, staring unseeing out the window as she finishes her dinner. She feels cold all over.
Despite Sarutobi-sensei’s evasiveness, she has the answer to the most important question: whatever Root is, whatever it does, Kurotsuchi is right that it thrives in the shadows cast by Konoha.

Sakura pushes the books to the side, trying to keep her blood pressure down. She wants to understand the people of Iwa, their dislike of her and her ilk. Based on the reception she’s received from them, Sakura knows her best chance of learning about Iwa is through their books. Kurotsuchi smirked at her when she left her at the library, but Sakura ignored it, hoping for the best. However, she did not quite expect this.

So much of Iwa’s history, their recounting of the past, is blatantly, unrepentantly biased. The way they speak of Konoha, of her land and her people as these backward, ignorant lowlanders, infuriates her.

Sakura glances down at the binding of the book she’s just placed down, strumming her fingers along it. The Lost Thousands.

The story of the standoff between Iwa and the Yellow Flash isn’t recounted in the Academy’s coverage of history, left out in favor of the tragedy of Kannabi Bridge and the loss of some of Konoha’s youngest and brightest. Kannabi is the origin story of the Copy Cat Ninja, of Kakashi, but the massacre of the thousands is the origin of Namikaze Minato.

It is apparent from the time line provided that it was this event that cemented Minato’s ascension to Hokage, as Sarutobi-sensei crowned Minato Yondaime within the year.

Yet Sakura struggles to reconcile the image of the Yellow Flash with the Minato presented within Mito’s journals. He was Naruto’s father and he sacrificed himself for his son and the village.

How could such a man so easily destroy thousands, even children younger than Academy graduates?

She knows that she is hypocritical in this line of thinking; she too may be called one day to do her duty by Konoha. While it is unlikely to be on the same scale as Minato, Sakura recognizes that there will undoubtedly be many unsavory assignments in her future. Can she follow through for her obligation?

(She remembers her younger self, standing before Tsunade-sama with a spine of steel as she mouths words without understanding the weight to them. She was, is, so naive, unrealistic. Where did she lose her resolve?)

Perhaps she is too soft, too sheltered from a childhood coddled away from the world of shinobi, where ninja were only fantastical stories told at bedtime.

(Somewhere, in the most secret place of her heart, Sakura knows that a line is drawn. A line formed by Gaara’s smile, Chojoro’s shy stutter, Yugito’s hot chocolate, and even Kurotsuchi’s proud smirk. The moment she met them as friends, as equals, her resolve melted away, leaving a mess of confusion and unsatisfactory answers.)

Sakura scrubs a hand over her eyes, exhaling heavily before lurching to her feet and placing the books back upon their shelves.

(She was never meant to be a shinobi.)
“Ready to go?” Kurotsuchi’s voice shatters Sakura’s introspection.

Sakura nods, trying to keep Kurotsuchi from seeing her red eyes as she heads toward the door. “Is there anything you need to do today? I’m fine with accompanying you on your errands.”

Kurotsuchi remains silent for a long moment, scrutinizing her. Finally she sighs and leads Sakura outside. “Actually there is something I wanted to do today. C’mon.”

Sakura follows in Kurotsuchi’s footsteps, gratitude burning in her throat.

“Really? Are you sure?” Sakura’s earlier introspection melts away as she nearly bounces with excitement.

“It’s no big deal, really,” Kurotsuchi replies, gaze cutting away from Sakura.

“It really is though,” Sakura says, reaching out and clasping Kurotsuchi’s shoulder. Then she releases her, stepping past her into the store. “Which one would you suggest?”

Sakura walks among the myriad of gliders, almost overwhelmed by the sheer variety.

Kurotsuchi saunters after her, hands clasped behind her back. “They all work if that’s what you’re wondering. Iwa only sells quality items.”

Sakura hides a wry smile at Kurotsuchi’s brag. She’s more than used to it now. “Of course. However, which ones glide the best? The fastest? The furthest? The longest? There must be different ones for different purposes.” She grins, raising her brows at Kurotsuchi. “Which is the best for racing?”

Kurotsuchi laughs. “Is that a challenge I hear? You are mighty confident for someone untried.”

Sakura shrugs, pulling out an orange glider and weighing it. It is decorated in delicate looking flowers, trailing up the sides like a trellis. Kurotsuchi clicks her tongue, taking the glider from Sakura’s hands and returning it to the shelves.

“You know nothing, flatlander,” Kurotsuchi says, insult lacking its usual sting. “This glider is not the right material for long-distance gliding.” She whirls around, leading Sakura to another section of the store. She pulls free a purple glider, standing it beside Sakura and examining it critically. “This one might work.”

Sakura smiles absently as she follows Kurotsuchi around the store, agreeably trying out multiple gliders until finally Kurotsuchi is satisfied.

“This one,” Kurotsuchi says, satisfied as she opens the panels fully before she passes it to Sakura. Sakura takes it, testing the yellow material. It is a bulkier glider than the others they’ve looked at, but Kurotsuchi seems pleased. “That one is perfect.”

Kurotsuchi haggles for a few moments with the shopkeep, getting the price on the rental down quite a bit more than Sakura expected.

“So where to now?” Sakura asks, reverently taking the glider and following Kurotsuchi outside. “Where’s the best place to start?”

Kurotsuchi hums for a moment, looking around. Then she grins, a wide, anticipatory grin that
sends a trickle of anxiety down Sakura’s spine. “Well, it’s always best to start with the biggest challenge,” she says, taking Sakura’s wrist.

Sakura recognizes that there is a dispersion of chakra around Kurotsuchi, but she can’t tell the exact technique. Whatever else Kurotsuchi has to say is cut off as her teleportation technique takes hold.

Sakura stumbles as they reappear on a roof, dizzy from the abrupt change in scenery. Kurotsuchi releases her wrist, pulling her glider from her holster and releasing its wings.

Her glider is obviously personalized, lovingly crafted into the appearance of a dragon. The wings swoop wide, embellished in gold flecks, giving the glider a texture similar to scales. It is much sleeker than Sakura’s, less bulky in nature. It also possesses two handles about a shoulder’s width apart, differing from the bar that cuts across the whole of Sakura’s glider.

Sakura peers off the roof before stepping back, closer to Kurotsuchi. She closes her eyes, trying not to think of all the implicit and explicit rules she’s broken. “Are we on the roof of the Kage Tower?”

Kurotsuchi’s eyes sparkle with excitement. “Where else? This is the best place to glide.”

“You do realize that my chakra is sealed, right? You know that I am currently fragile and rather squishy,” Sakura says, shuffling to the edge of the roof. The Tower looms high above all else and Sakura is thankfully for the sturdiness of the rock beneath her feet. “Are you trying to get me killed?”

Kurotsuchi rolls her eyes. “There are far easier methods of disposing of you.” Her nose wrinkles. “None that are quite this messy. You will be fine. This model of glider is designed for safety. Besides, I’ll be there too. I’ll make sure you are safe.”

Anxiety thrums through Sakura’s limbs, making her blood sing. She huffs, surprised to find that she does trust Kurotsuchi in this, with her life. She may be gruff, but Sakura knows that Kurotsuchi is honorable and true. She won’t fail in this. Anticipation pools within Sakura’s gut as she takes a stabilizing breath. Whatever happens, it will make a hell of a story to tell Ashura and Indra.

“What do I need to do?” Sakura asks.

“Here,” Kurotsuchi says, putting her glider aside in the stead of Sakura’s. She opens it fully, positioning Sakura’s hands across the bar. Sakura holds still as Kurotsuchi pulls and tugs straps into place around Sakura’s waist and hips. “When you jump your body will be held aloft by the glider itself. Make sure to keep your hands positioned apart as you will use those to steer. There aren’t many others using gliders at this time of day and the yellow of yours will inform them that you are in training. When you near the ground keep your legs braced to catch yourself. Any questions?”

Sakura shakes her head. “I think I’m ready to go.”

“Good,” Kurotsuchi says. She rustles in her bag, pulling out a dark pair of leather gloves. “Wear these; they’ll help you keep your grip on the glider. Now, take a few steps back; you’ll need a running jump.”

Sakura does as Kurotsuchi commands, taking a deep breath as she squares up about fifteen feet from the lip of the roof. At this angle, she can see nothing but the endless abyss of sky. The sky is darkening in shades of orange and pink, the sun hanging nearly at the same level as the roof, a little
off to the left of Sakura’s position. It is beautiful and Sakura has the exhilarating and terrifying realization that she is about to join in its abyss.

It is the unknown that scares her, taunts her with her finite knowledge but, as Sakura takes in Kurotsuchi’s alert eyes and calm smile, Sakura finds peace. It may be unknown to her, but it is familiar territory for Kurotsuchi.

She trusts Kurotsuchi, despite Sarutobi-sensei’s misgivings regarding Iwa in general and the Kamizuru clan in particular.

Sakura grins back at Kurotsuchi, begins to run, and takes a headlong leap of faith.

“How are my siblings in strife?” Han asks, passing Sakura a fruit tart.

Sakura looks up from the letter, taking in the unabashed interest in Han’s eyes. Something deeper, almost like longing, lingers there, reminding Sakura all too well of Naruto and Gaara. Her heart twists.

Ever since their first meeting Han has continued to seek her out, in a seemingly random pattern. She does notice that he always comes across her when she is alone, without Kurotsuchi to escort her. She suspects that he is lonely, especially considering the disinterest if not outright disdain he receives from others.

Just like most other jinchūriki.

“Naruto is well,” she replies, biting into the tart. She hums in delight; blackberry, her favorite of the fruits grown within Iwa. “He’s been stationed in Kiri for a few months. Apparently he’s started a rivalry with one of the Swordsmen, Mangetsu.” She leans in toward Han in a confidential sort of way. “Naruto’s a bit jealous of Mangetsu’s skills with weaponry.”

“The people of Kiri are more than proficient in the art of kenjutsu,” Han says, smiling.

Sakura is glad to see Han’s open face. The fact that he is willing to bare his face and expressions to her means the world, especially when Sakura considers the fact that Kakashi-sensei still hasn’t revealed his face to her or the other members of Team Seven.

“Perhaps to the exclusion of some of the finer maneuvers of ninjutsu,” Han continues, grinning wickedly. “However, Naruto can undoubtedly learn some good skills from this Mangetsu fellow.”

“I know I learned a lot while I was there,” Sakura replies, passing Han a mango pastry. He has a tooth for the sugary, sweet fruits. “Chojuto was a master of the blade; he honed my naginata skills to the best they’ve ever been.”

“You use a pole arm?” Han asks. “I’d enjoy a demonstration of these skills sometime.”

“On the training grounds?” Sakura asks. “Kurotsuchi and I have sparred there a few times.”

“You’d be willing?” Han asks, eagerness belied in his posture. For such a large man, he is easily excitable.

“Oh course,” Sakura replies. “As long as you don’t mind my rusty skills. I haven’t exactly kept up the skills…” She slumps further into her seat suddenly. “I don’t have my naginata, Sashimasu; it
Sakura’s first encounter with Iwa’s illustrious Bomb Brigade is something of an inauspicious beginning.

It happens something like this:

Sakura ducks beneath Kurotsuchi’s staff, grin bordering on giddy. This is one of the few times that Sakura’s chakra is released and usable in Iwa and it is a sensation akin to the feeling of free falling into a glide. She loves this; the thrum of chakra within her veins, quickening her heartbeat and reminding her that she is alive.

Sakura kicks out, drawing Sashimasu up and over her head to shift Han’s gauntlets away from her. The blades attached to it sing as it slides off Sashimasu and Sakura deftly whirls around, releasing his cestus and sending Han headlong toward Kurotsuchi.

She dodges back, watching as they exchange blows, wearing matching grins belying their intensity. She leans heavily against Sashimasu, basking in comraderie forged between the two. Where once there was mistrust and dislike, now is now open communication, at least on the battlegrounds. She chuckles, regretting it immediately as both turn to her, strikes ceasing.

“Sakura seems to find this amusing,” Kurotsuchi says, twirling her staff in a seemingly innocuous manner.

“It certainly seems so,” Han replies, dusting off his gauntlets.

Sakura isn’t sure she’s ever seen such a mismatched pair, Han looming high above and Kurotsuchi planted sturdily on the ground. Their intentions are the same however.

She scrambles to a defensive position, bringing Sashimasu up as they strike out in tandem, Kurotsuchi going low and Han aiming high.

Sakura stumbles backwards, body unused to her chakra after so many months without regular use, and curses as she begins to fall. Han and Kurotsuchi shift, making sure their weapons do no lasting damage. While they are off-balanced, Sakura grabs hold of both Han and Kurotsuchi, pulling them down with her.

They collapse in a pile of flailing limbs, weapons cast akimbo, and laughter.

“What a state,” a voice murmurs. “If only Onoki-oji could see you now.”

Kurotsuchi tenses, scrambling to her feet, ignoring Sakura and Han as she addresses the newcomer, “Mitsubachi, what reason do you have for loitering about? I thought you were on duty with the
“I am,” Mitsubachi replies drily, indicating her partner beside her. “Monga recently returned from a mission and hadn’t realized we were hosting diplomats from Konoha.”

Sakura flushes as she gets her feet, hating the way Monga stares at her. She reads the judgment in his eyes, can practically feel his condescension crawling across her skin. She tries to ignore it, tries to not let it get to her, but despite herself it does.

Han shifts so he is positioned slightly in front of her. “Monga, this is Haruno Sakura. She is a respected and honored guest of Tsuchikage-sama.” The warning in his voice and posture is as clear as day: do not trifle with Sakura.

Mitsubachi ignores the men as they size each other up, instead moving closer to Sakura. She leans in close, investigating Sashimasu. “Fine craftsmanship,” she says, finally looking at Sakura. “If you are done with training for the day, you can accompany us to a Brigade training if you like.”

Sakura, raised on stories of the terror that is Iwa’s Bomb Brigade, nods, heart quickening in anticipation. When will she ever get another chance like this?

“C’mon,” Mitsubachi says, heading to the door. “We train outside of Iwa. I assume you know how to use a glider?” Sakura nods. Mitsubachi grins and suddenly Sakura can see the familial resemblance between her and Kurotsuchi. “Good. Let’s go!”

“Of all the half-witted, moronic, asinine ideas!”

Sakura jumps up from her bed, running out into the adjoining room. She’s never heard Sarutobi-sensei yell like this. He storms into the room, pacing back and forth with a thunderous expression.

“What happened?” Sakura asks, perching on one of the chairs.

“Onoki happened,” Sarutobi-sensei snaps, eyes blazing. Sakura just watches him, knowing better than to escalate his frustrations. “The imbecile makes ridiculous demands for the treaty.”

“What does he want?” Sakura says.

“‘Reparations for the losses of children over the course of the relationship between Iwagakure and Konohagakure,’” Sarutobi-sensei says, obviously parroting someone else’s words. “As if we didn’t lose clan children to Iwa over the years!” He whirls on Sakura, planting his hands on his hips. “He wants us to give him eleven children from Konoha clans, all hand-selected by him, to do with as he pleases. As if we do not know what happens when clan children are taken.”

“What happens?” Sakura asks, stomach swooping low. She’s heard whispers, but nothing concrete. She is the last daughter of a merchant family, left out of the dealings of shinobi clans and their precious, secret techniques and heritage. “What do they do with the children?”

“The standard practice is experimentation,” Sarutobi-sensei says, disgust curdling his expression. “They study the techniques, attempt to harness them as their own. It’s how shinobi from both Iwa and Kiri possess specializations in lava release techniques. For those with kekkei genkai it is even worse. You met Ao in Kiri. You know what is done.”

Sakura swallows against her suddenly dry throat. Not for the first time, Sakura is glad to be of a no-
name heritage, seemingly worthless in the shinobi world. She cannot afford to play these high-stake games or bear the responsibility of such a heritage.

“Why is Tsuchikage-sama asking reparations?” Sakura asks quietly, not truly wanting to hear the answer.

Sarutobi-sensei stiffens, pacing coming to a stop. “What?”


“They were lost before your time,” Sarutobi-sensei replies, response evasive.

“But Konoha took them,” Sakura says, reading between the lines.

“Some were taken by Orochimaru,” Sarutobi-sensei admits, passion extinguished. He deflates into a seat, holding his head in his hands. In the moment he looks beyond his age, brittle and frail. It seems that a single whisper could blow him away. “His experiments were illicit, illegal. When his atrocities were discovered…well, he was exiled from the village.”

“Some were legal though,” Sakura says, pushing at him, digging into the obvious wound. She has to ferret out this information, even if it tarnishes her understanding of Konoha.

“Some were legal,” Sarutobi-sensei agrees, equally as quiet. He seems small beneath Sakura’s steady gaze. He doesn’t look at her, he can’t. “A necessary vice in the name of keeping up with the ruthlessness of other villages.”

“There are other ways,” Sakura replies, heart squeezing as she imagines her friends back home: Sasuke, Hinata, Kiba, Ino; any of them subjected to the horrors that await stolen clan children. No necessary vice is worth the life of a child. “We could rise above; be better, do it differently.”

Sarutobi-sensei shakes his head, looking to her with pained eyes. “The Roots of Konoha run deep. To uproot them now, remove them, will destroy Konoha, cause it to wither from within. Konoha cannot survive without its Roots.”

“Roots fed on the blood of innocents are not roots meant to thrive,” Sakura says. “Perhaps the plant itself is corrupted; perhaps Konoha needs to change. There are other roots within Konoha, bred upon the Will of Fire. Maybe a pruning is necessary.”

Sarutobi-sensei shrugs helplessly and for the first time Sakura is confronted with his mortality, his fallibility. “It is a nice dream, but a dream nonetheless.”

“Konoha was started from a dream,” Sakura says, standing up and heading toward the door. “It can be reborn from one.”

Sakura clutches the sleek purple glider in hand, watching with amusement as Kurotsuchi and Han exchange lighthearted barbs. She isn’t sure if she’s supposed to be here, outside the village limits on the ridge above Scorpion Canyon, but she can’t pass up the chance to glide with her chakra free. According to Han and Kurotsuchi, using chakra brings it to a whole new level of enjoyment. Besides, Kurotsuchi has a failsafe seal that can get them back into Iwa quickly if needed.

“There’s an updraft in the canyon today,” Kurotsuchi says, falling back to walk beside Sakura.
“It’ll lift you up and prolong the gliding.”

“Are we about to start?” Sakura asks, a teasing note in her voice. “Are we in the perfect location? I thought the cluster of rocks half a mile back was promising too.”

“Hush,” Kurotsuchi replies. “This right here is exactly what we need.”

Han laughs, leading the way with long strides to the edge of the canyon. Sakura’s breath catches once more at the sheer majesty of it. She doesn’t think she’ll ever get used to this; the myriad of colors in the stratified rock, spelling out a story of history beyond their own written texts. The River Stradh cuts through the canyon, a glimmering jewel beneath the heat of the sun.

“You ready to try it out?” Han asks, eyes crinkling with his own excitement.

“If you’ll do the honors?” Sakura says, glancing askance to Kurotsuchi.

Kurotsuchi steps forward, gesturing for Sakura to come her way. Sakura lifts her braid, allowing Kurotsuchi access to her neck. Kurotsuchi brushes her fingertips along Sakura’s neck and a strange tickling begins to buzz through Sakura’s spine. It’s almost a melting sensation as Sakura’s control of her chakra snaps back into place. Sakura feels centered and whole as she reaches out for her chakra and it greets her easily.

“Thanks Kurotsuchi,” Sakura says, shaking out her limbs. “Han, you want to go first and lead the way?”

Han smiles down at her, brandishing his black glider. He looks different without his armor, smaller maybe, even though he continues to loom over her and Kurotsuchi. “Certainly.”

Han takes a running leap, pushing a good ten feet off the canyon’s edge. He pulls the glider up above his head, grasping the handles as he begins to glide.

“Your turn,” Kurotsuchi says, slapping her extra pair of gloves into Sakura’s hand. “I’ll follow behind.”

Sakura nods, yanking on the gloves before squaring up with the cliff. She clutches the glider in hand, shaking off her nerves. She hasn’t used the sleeker model much, especially not on such a large drop. Still, she is confident in her skills, especially since she can use her chakra if something goes awry.

Sakura runs and jumps, lifting the glider above her head as the wind catches her and snaps her up into the current. She laughs as the glider lifts several feet, caught in the updraft Kurotsuchi mentioned.

She shifts the glider, pointing it in Han’s direction as she glides down to his level. A rustle next to her tells her that Kurotsuchi has caught up as well. Sakura closes her eyes for a moment, just taking in the sensations of the wind whipping around her and through her hair, the lovely strain of her arms as she keeps hold of the glider. For the moment, she simply is.

That all changes as Han’s yell of warning shatters the tranquility as it echoes around the canyon walls.

Sakura’s eyes snap open as, ahead of her, she sees an odd sight.

A giant clay bird flies in their direction, slightly below them. Two figures sit astride its back, both decked in black cloaks covered in red clouds.
Sakura veers closer into formation with Han and Kurotsuchi. “What’s the plan?” she asks.

Kurotsuchi’s face twists in a sneer. “That’s Deidara,” she says, disgust painting her tone. “The scum’s returned to Iwa; it’ll be his funeral.”

She adjusts her glider into a dive, aiming directly for the bird.

“Han?” Sakura asks, looking to him.

Han’s eyes are narrowed as he scrutinizes the pair. “They’re here for me. It would be remiss of me not to address them personally.”

He follows Kurotsuchi, retracting his glider’s wings as he approaches. He falls quickly, aiming directly at the hunchback member, Sasori, as Kurotsuchi engages Deidara.

Sakura curses under her breath, calculates the distance, and tucks away her glider, free falling toward the bird. The wind whips past her and Sakura curses the fact that she is weaponless.

She hits the bird roughly, keeping a grip by enhancing the chakra in the soles of her feet. Taking a quick lay of the land, Sakura keeps her attention on Deidara, summoning chakra to her hands.

Her hands flicker with blue energy, forming scalpels above her knuckles. It is a new technique to Sakura, bastardized from what she’s seen Tsunade-sama and Shizune do. She doubts she can keep it going long, but she hopes she won’t need to.

Sakura moves in close on Deidara, watching from the corner of her eye as Kurotsuchi strikes out at Deidara with her tanto. It sings as it catches against a kunai. Kurotsuchi’s eyes blaze with righteous anger.

“Why have you returned, traitor?” she demands. “You court your doom.”

Deidara grins, ducking beneath Sakura’s strike without even looking in her direction. “I’m glad you’re here for this Kurotsuchi-chan; you’re so deliciously explosive.”

Sakura whirls as Kurotsuchi releases a screech of rage, shoving her fist out toward Deidara’s leg. The chakra scalpels pass through his skin and he crumples to one knee.

Instead of seeming angry, he laughs, throwing his hands out wide as clay spews forth from…are those mouths on his hands?

Sakura isn’t given a chance to contemplate it as the clay explodes, disorienting Sakura and throwing both her and Kurotsuchi from the clay bird. Sakura fumbles for a moment before she manages to pull her glider free. There is little reason for concern, however, as a platform shoots up to meet her. Sakura catches herself on the platform, looking up to see that it juts from the edge of the canyon.

Kurotsuchi stands on a vertical pillar higher up, peering down at her. “Told you I had you covered,” she says, concentrating for a moment and creating more pillars to pierce through the clay bird and hold it in place.

Sakura runs down the pillar she’s on back toward the canyon wall, bounding up the side of it as quickly as she can to get back to the action at hand.
Han is holding his own against the Akatsuki members, despite his lack of armor. Steam rises off his body as he punches Sasori, knocking him away from himself. However, Deidara is immediately up in his face, throwing up flash bangs to blind and incapacitate him.

Sasori’s scorpion tail whips out at lightning speed, nicking Han’s face.

Kurotsuchi disrupts the surface of the clay bird, creating spikes beneath Sasori and Deidara’s feet to knock them off balance. Sakura leaps forward, driving her fist into Sasori’s arm as he wheels back. It doesn’t affect him, however, and Sakura flips away from his retaliatory tail strike, thinking quickly.

She knows the basics of his skills: puppet master and poison specialist. Perhaps this isn’t his true body, merely a vessel for his whims.

Sakura isn’t given the chance to implement a new strategy as two things happen simultaneously:

First, Han’s eyes roll into the back of his head as he collapses against the surface of the bird. Sakura immediately throws herself in his direction, trying to prevent him from falling off the bird.

Second, Deidara’s expression twists into an ugly grimace as he glares at Kurotsuchi. “This is my art,” he spits. “You are not allowed to taint it.” He claps his hands together and the bird begins to rumble.

Considering the way that Sasori immediately begins cursing out his partner, Sakura knows that they need to get the hell off the bird.

She grabs hold of Han, lifting him with more than a touch of chakra before throwing herself as far from the bird as she can. She isn’t worried as she and Han begin to plummet.

Sakura trusts Kurotsuchi.

Sure enough, a platform of earth appears below Sakura and she braces Han awkwardly on her back, shoving chakra into her legs as she lands. She sinks waist-deep into the platform, gritting her teeth against the jarring sensation before pulling herself free and looking at Han.

He is unconscious and sweating, eyes flickering behind his eyelids. It is obvious that he has been poisoned. However, she’s also certain that it is non-lethal.

A curious popping sounds above her before the roar of explosion fills the canyon, echoing around its walls. Sakura squints as she looks up into the destruction created by Deidara’s bird. It is apparent now that he was once the golden child of the Bomb Brigade. Kurotsuchi lands lightly beside her, glaring as the Akatsuki duo emerge from the debris on a new clay bird, flying in their direction.

“Kurotsuchi!” Sakura says sharply, waiting until she actually looks at her. “Kurotsuchi we need to go! We aren’t prepared for this and Han is incapacitated.”

Kurotsuchi turns away from her, focus on Deidara. “I can’t leave him,” she says. “He turned his back on our village. There is no honor in fleeing a traitor!”

“There’s no honor in dying this way! To an ambush where we don’t have access to most of our techniques!” Sakura says in return. “There is no honor in acting a fool.”

Kurotsuchi wavers and, finally, turns to face Sakura and Han. She glares at Sakura. “You owe me.”
“I know. We can discuss your terms later,” Sakura replies, lifting Han. “We need to go, now.”

Kurotsuchi places a hand on both Sakura and Han. “There is a quicker way.”

There is a sharp, dizzying tug behind Sakura’s bellybutton and suddenly she pitches forward and knows no more.

“This is your fault!” Onoki says, stomping forward and shoving his finger into Sarutobi-sensei’s chest. “You are your student brought this down upon us!”

She folds her hands in her lap, wishing she could just sink into the floor. This is her fault. She was the reason that Kurotsuchi and Han were even outside the village when Deidara and Sasori attacked. And now Han is in the hospital and Kurotsuchi sits beside her, taking her grandfather’s verbal onslaught alongside Sakura.

However, as she opens her mouth to speak, Kurotsuchi steps forward, glaring down at her grandfather. “Han and I were the ones who insisted that Sakura join us at Scorpion Canyon, Onoki-oji,” she says. “You told me to introduce her to the landmarks of Iwa.”

“Within the village,” Onoki replies fiercely. “And regardless of whose idea it was, it doesn’t mean that Konoha isn’t at fault!”

“Are you suggesting that we hired Akatsuki for the ambush?” Sarutobi-sensei asks, voice dangerously calm. “We aren’t the ones who have a history of hiring their services.”

Onoki’s cheeks flush, either from embarrassment or rage, Sakura cannot tell. “You know as well as I that Konoha is capable of all sorts of treachery, should it benefit them.”

“And how would this benefit us?” Sarutobi-sensei snaps, belying his agitated state. “We’re seeking a treaty of peace with Iwa, true peace. Why the hell would we compromise it?”

“Yes, I’ve been compromising and subverting our rules from day one,” Onoki replies, eyes cutting to Sakura. “Her chakra has been allowed unfettered on far too many occasions, beyond just training sessions. Iwa has turned a blind eye as my granddaughter is generally a good judge of character. In this case, it seems I have been too lenient with her and with Konoha.”

“You are being ridiculous!” Sarutobi-sensei says.

“What are you saying?” Sarutobi-sensei asks.

“There will be no treaty between Iwa and Konoha,” Onoki says simply. “We do not deal in traitors. As for you, well, it is apparent we’ve been far too lenient in your treatment thus far.”

“Onoki-oji–” Kurotsuchi begins, outrage clear.
“Silence!” Onoki bellows. “You’ve proven yourself compromised in this matter. We will discuss your punishment later.”

“We are here as diplomats,” Sarutobi-sensei says, stepping in front of Sakura in a protective stance. “We have made no gestures of aggression to you or to Iwa; you cannot hold us here.”

“I am the law,” Onoki replies, “but I am fair. You will be held in custody as I begin communications with the Hokage regarding the conditions of your release. Once I am satisfied, you will be freed.” He looks beyond Sarutobi-sensei, catching Sakura’s gaze behind his shoulder. “You will find the accommodations generous.”

Onoki snaps his fingers and guards appear at his side. As they do, Kurotsuchi grabs Sakura’s hand, squeezing it in encouragement. “Take them into custody,” Onoki says, flicking a wrist in dismissal.

A firm hand comes down on Sakura’s shoulder and she allows it to guide her out the door as Kurotsuchi begins to rail at her grandfather.

Sakura makes her face impassive as she and Sarutobi-sensei are led away, keeping a relaxed grip on whatever it is that Kurotsuchi slipped into her hand.

“I am sorry Sakura-chan.”

Sakura glances up, surprised. “Why are you sorry, Sarutobi-sensei? This is my fault. I bent the rules that were clearly laid out by Tsuchikage-sama from the beginning.”

Sarutobi-sensei shakes his head. “I don’t believe that you did, Sakura-chan. Onoki would have trumped up charges regardless; Kurotsuchi allowing you to use your chakra was an easy scapegoat. I’m afraid I dragged you into a decades old vendetta between myself and Onoki. I thought he had risen above it, but apparently not.”

Sakura nods, waiting to see if he’ll continue. However, he remains quiet, contemplative even.

Honestly, their custody housing isn’t all that poor. It’s slightly smaller than their guest rooms. The biggest change is the fact that they now wear thin collars that completely restrict their chakra. Sakura cannot feel the presence of her chakra at all. She resigns herself to this fact, knowing that Tsuchikage-sama possesses the only key.

Sakura redirects her gaze to the strip of blue cloth in her hand, a portion of Kurotsuchi’s glider. The gift Kurotsuchi gave her. She runs her hand over it, smiling fondly.

She knows, despite everything, Kurotsuchi has her back.

Sakura moves to one of the two beds in the room and begins breathing deeply, entering into a meditative state. Indra taught her this to harness her chakra, but it does the job of calming her effectively.

When Sakura opens her eyes it is deep into the night, based on the darkness outside the windows. She furrows her brows, wondering what drew her from her trance, only to see movement in the corner of the room.

The light turns on and Sakura sees Kurotsuchi and Han standing before her. Sakura’s jaw drops, but she and Sarutobi-sensei stay silent as Kurotsuchi gestures for them to stand. She can see that
Han carries their packs, all of the equipment confiscated from them upon their arrival.

“C’mon,” Kurotsuchi says, leading them to the door.

Sakura immediately follows, Sarutobi-sensei falling in behind her a bit more reluctantly. As they peek outside the door, Sakura sees that the shinobi guarding them, chūnin from the looks of them, seem dazed, expressions slack.

Genjutsu of some kind.

Kurotsuchi leads them out of the building a different way than they entered it, sticking close to the shadows. No words are exchanged as they move but a silent sort of conversation seems to take place among them.

Sakura knows what Kurotsuchi and Han sacrifice to do this. They head to the main gates of Iwa and Sakura blinks as they approach the lone guard on the gate: Mitsubachi.

She salutes at them lazily and begins the process of raising the gates, using a jutsu to keep the movement silent.

Han divvies up their packs, passing them to Sakura and Sarutobi-sensei. Sakura bows to him, startling as he yanks her into a hug.

“Say hello to my siblings please, little sister,” Han says softly against her ear.

“Thank you Han,” Sakura replies, equally as soft.

“A life for a life,” Han says. “You prevented my capture at the hands of my enemies. How could I not do the same for you?” He releases her, chucking her beneath the chin. “Run swiftly.”

Kurotsuchi steps away from Sarutobi-sensei, his collar in hand. She approaches Sakura, brandishing a seal in hand. “If you could turn around?”

Sakura does so, lifting her braid out of Kurotsuchi’s way as the seal brushes the back of her neck. The collar falls away and Kurotsuchi presses her fingers to the nape of her neck, releasing the painted seals.

“These will wash away now,” Kurotsuchi says as Sakura turns back to her.

“Kurotsuchi, your grandfather-”

“I’ll deal with Onoki-oji,” she replies, resolute as she stares up at Sakura.

“I cannot repay you for what you’re doing,” Sakura says.

“Run. Return to Konoha safely. I will consider your debt paid if you do that,” Kurotsuchi says, smile utterly heartbreaking.

Sakura leans down, pressing her lips to Kurotsuchi’s in a kiss. It is a far different kiss than the one she shared with Haku; this one is born of passion, desperation, and a bond cemented into place with sacrifice.

The kiss itself is wet and hard, filled with clicking teeth and dancing tongues.

Sakura pulls away, breathing a bit heavier than before. With the weak light offered by the moon, Sakura can tell Kurotsuchi’s cheeks are flushed.
“We will meet again,” Kurotsuchi says in that stubborn, resolute way that Sakura has come to regard affectionately.

“We will,” Sakura replies, clasping the back of Kurotsuchi’s neck and pressing her forehead to hers.

“Now go,” Kurotsuchi says, pushing Sakura away.

She and Sarutobi-sensei begin to run.

She does not look back.

They are on the outskirts of Stone, so close to Fire once more, when it finally happens.

They are ambushed.

If it were a regular ambush, with low to medium level shinobi, they could have handled it just fine. Even if the ninja were a higher level, they could have done well. Unfortunately this is not the case.

They are ambushed by Orochimaru and Kabuto.

It happens like this:

It is late at night and they are just setting up camp when Sakura notices the peculiar silence. While the ground is covered in snow and the sounds of wildlife are therefore dampened, but this quiet is deafening. She looks up at her teacher who is gazing across the clearing in concentration.

She pulls out her scroll with Sashimasu sealed within, just to have it on hand and at the ready.

“My, my, you have been busy,” a voice drawls.

Sakura whirls, catching sight of Kabuto standing in a nearby tree. Honestly, she is very surprised to see him, of all people, there. While, rationally, she knows that he is a dangerous traitor, Kabuto just seems very unassuming. Still, she unfurls the scroll, releasing Sashimasu.

“Good to see you again,” she replies.

His eyes crease upward in an insincere smile. “I cannot quite say the same. Still the main attraction is yet to come.”

“Thank you for the introduction,” a new voice hisses.

Sakura blanches. This is the voice that haunted her nightmares the two months following the chūnin exams. It whispers tales of her failures and shortcomings.

“Orochimaru,” Sarutobi says, voice surprisingly controlled for his long history with the man.

“In the flesh,” he responds, bowing to him mockingly.

Sakura notes the young girl who stands behind the man, looking absolutely miserable. Her hair is long and crimson red. Sakura’s eyes narrow in on the small looping chain that connects her wrists together.
She is not here willingly.

Orochimaru takes notice of Sakura’s interest with a twisted delight. “My newest project,” he claims, running a hand through the girl’s hair. She flinches violently. “Her name is Karin.”

“I led you to them,” she says quietly, not looking at anyone. “You told me you’d let me go.”

Orochimaru pats her cheek hard, undoubtedly leaving a bruise. “I changed my mind.”

Sakura feels white-hot rage sear through her. She is unaware of the ensuing conversation. She knows, logically, that Orochimaru tried to do the same thing to Sasuke; to forcefully upheave his life and kidnap him. It is different to see the actual act. She cannot imagine Sasuke in a similar environment and she refuses to do so.

She will not allow this to happen again.

Sarutobi has engaged Orochimaru in battle so Sakura turns her intent, all-consuming fury on Kabuto. She knows little of his actual skill set so she skirts around him, trying to draw him out.

Kabuto doesn’t disappoint. With a smirk, he lithely approaches, hands glowing with chakra.

Sakura’s eyes flash, absorbing the movements of his chakra claws. It is obvious that he has incredibly precise chakra control if he has the capability of manifesting physical constructs. Thankfully, Sakura has an equal ability.

She dodges beneath his strike, coming up under his guard and slashing out with Sashimasu, fury enhancing the strength of her chakra. It catches him in the shoulder, slicing him clean through.

Sakura, though surprised by the ease of this fight, utilizes her momentum to bring herself over to the girl held captive.

She smiles reassuringly at the young girl whose eyes are wide with fear. “Don’t worry,” Sakura murmurs, examining her wrists. “I’m going to help you.”

“They’re chakra restraints,” the girl informs her, grateful for the unexpected help. “The bastard said that a specific chakra is keyed into them. It’s the only way to get them off.”

Sakura shakes her head slightly, deep in thought. “I don’t think it’s the only way. These…chakra restraints as you call them seem to still be in the testing stage. There are a lot of flaws.”

“How?” Karin murmurs, staring at her pale wrists in awe. She is free.

“Can you free me?” Karin asks, feeling hope born anew in her chest for the first time since her mother’s passing.

“I believe so. Hold very still with your arms out,” Sakura orders. The girl rushes to obey. Sakura pulls at the core of her chakra, forcing Sashimasu to its limits. It groans beneath the strain. “Just for a moment,” Sakura whispers. With a quick strike, the chain is broken. “Thank goodness.”

“How?” Karin murmurs, staring at her pale wrists in awe. She is free.

“Good question,” a voice comments.

Sakura pulls Karin to the ground with her as senbon fly overhead. She turns, seeing Kabuto standing tall and proud, blood staining his shirt. Her eyes narrow; there is no wound.

“Overload of chakra,” Sakura replies, eyes darting to Karin. In common code she blinks the word, “Run.”
Thankfully, the girl has had some sort of training in code and nods. Sakura stands to her feet, focusing on her enemy.

“How are you still standing?” she asks, moving around him in a slow circle.

To her relief, all of his attention is on her and Karin manages to slip away. Sakura sends up a brief prayer for her safe passage.

“Medical ninjutsu,” the man replies with a smirk, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “You’d be surprised how useful non-combative jutsu can be.” He gestures to his chakra constructs. “These for example were once a simple scalpel technique, designed to expedite the healing process. Now—“ He flicks the claws a few times. “Now, they will lead to your capture.”

Sakura goes very still, eyes tracking to Orochimaru before returning to Kabuto. “Capture? I thought the name of the game was death.”

He laughs. “I am glad you like banter. Too many are too afraid to play along. Take the Sensor for example; quiet as a mouse. Not to worry,” he adds, delighting in her pale expression. “She will be rejoining us soon enough. Perhaps you can pass a little of that Will of Fire on to her, pacifist ninja.”

“Why does everyone call me that?” Sakura mutters under her breath. Louder she says, “I only act the pacifist when among friends.”

“I’m hurt,” he says, sauntering closer. “I thought we were close.”

Sakura manages to dodge the first few swipes before being caught in the left shoulder with the fourth. It goes curiously numb and her left hand falls away from Sashimasu. Flabbergasted, she Shunshins out of range, staring down at her hand. It is unresponsive to even the simplest of commands. Sakura feels dread well in the pit of her stomach. Her more complex ninjutsu is out of the question now. (Sakura makes a note to learn how to perform all of her jutsu without hand signs, even the most difficult.) Sashimasu is also much more unwieldy with only one hand in play. (She may be ambidextrous but naginata are most effective as a two-handed weapon.)

“Do you understand the beauty of it yet?” Kabuto asks, abnormally cheerful for their fight. “Anything can be lethal when you get creative with it!”

Sakura smirks, sealing Sashimasu. He certainly isn’t wrong. “It certainly can,” she replies.

Kabuto’s lips curl into a genuine smile. “I’m glad you see it my way Sakura-chan. Just think, once Orochimaru-sama is finished playing his little games with you, it’ll be my turn.” His eyes glaze. “Your control of chakra is astounding. I’d like to experiment with it. Who knows?” His smile widens. “If you survive, Orochimaru-sama might let me make you my assistant.”

Sakura does her best to tune out his chatter. She would rather be dead than end up in Orochimaru’s grasp. She humiliated him as a genin and Sakura knows that the man is unforgiving. She resolves to, at the very least; make it impossible for Kabuto to capture her. Death would be a relief in comparison to whatever Orochimaru has in store for her.

So she moves in closer to Kabuto, hands light without the comfort of Sashimasu. Her left arm hangs strangely limp as she rushes the man, dodging and flipping around his furious stabs. She thinks Shisui and Itachi would be proud of her fluid moves, making this terrifying fight appear an ethereal dance. She vaults over the man’s head, grabbing her braid in her right hand as she falls and pulling tightly.

Sakura grins as Kabuto makes a muffled screech of pain. The kansashi that litter her hair
indiscriminately are coated in all types of poisons, ranging from paralytics to nausea-inducing to painfully lethal. They dig into the tender skin around Kabuto’s neck as Sakura holds the braid taut, cutting off the man’s circulation.

Sakura watches with glee as his chakra constructs flicker away as he focuses on healing. She doubts that her poisons will be enough to take him out because of his proficiency as a medical ninja but she knows that the potent cocktail and lack of oxygen will keep him occupied. His struggles weaken and eventually cease altogether. He falls back against her and Sakura huffs at the awkward positioning. The lack of use in her left arm is grating.

Warily, Sakura begins to release her hold.

“Don’t!” a new voice calls.

Startled, Sakura tightens her grip and directs her gaze to the newcomer.

“Karin?” she asks, incredulous. “Why are you back? I thought you’d fled.”

The girl flushes, rubbing the back of her neck nervously. It is a trait so similar to Naruto that Sakura has to smile. “Couldn’t just leave you out here. It isn’t right.” Her eyes fall to Kabuto, disgust clear. “You know that isn’t enough to keep him down.”

Sakura tries to nod, but thinks better of it. “Yes. I planned to bring out Sashimasu out again.”

Karin shakes her head. “This guy…he’s a monster. The moment you release your hold he’s going to be on his feet again. I can Sense that his healing is holding him in a state bordering consciousness and unconsciousness.”

“Then what do you suggest I do?” Sakura inquires, widening her stance to make the position a bit more comfortable.

“I can seal him!” she announces confidently. “I have a technique…it is called the Adamantine Sealing Chains…I promise I can hold him!”

Sakura’s eyes widen slightly with recognition. Mito-sama mentioned the technique in her journals. She sealed the Kyuubi with it. Sakura wonders about the girl’s heritage but now is not the time. “You are sure?” Sakura asks hesitantly. “You can still flee; this isn’t your fight.”

The girl draws herself up, flipping her bright red hair with a snort. “It’s been my fight since these bastards took me from my village. I won’t flee; this is my fight too.”

Sakura nods. “Then I entrust him to you.”

Sakura watches as Karin goes through the signs, chains shooting out from her and wrapping around Kabuto. For a moment, Karin concentrates her Senses on the man before finally nodding to Sakura.

Sakura nods, slowly releasing her braid. With a grimace, she pulls it from where it is lodged in Kabuto’s neck.

Several kanzashi stay behind.

“You have everything under control here?” she asks briskly, sighing in relief as feeling begins to return to her left arm.

Karin nods. “You can count on me.”
Sakura smiles quickly before turning to her teacher’s battle. “I’m coming Sarutobi-sensei.”

Both Hiruzen and Orochimaru are bleeding from innumerable wounds and the ground around them is littered with evidence of their fight. She watches from the sidelines for a moment, astonished at the opportunities that her teacher is missing. They are few and far between, but they are there.

There is a chance to end Orochimaru.

Then, Sakura sees her teacher’s hands shake; the most brittle and fragile of leaves on the great tree of Konoha. He is incapable of the task at hand. He will not kill Orochimaru. There are myriad of reasons: too old, too sentimental, too weary, too much, too little.

Too forgiving.

She knows what she must do.

Outmatched, outranked, outgunned, exhausted, and vastly out of her depth, Sakura shunts her teacher to the side, taking his place before Orochimaru.

The beloved pupils of Sarutobi Hiruzen face each other; one fallen from grace, the other on the rise.

What a laugh.

Orochimaru’s eyes light up with delight as Sakura appears before him. She shudders, all of her nightmares at the forefront of her mind but the feeling is fully back in her arm.

“Sashimasu!” she shouts, summoning the naginata back into her hands, running her fingers lovingly over the familiar grooves.

“How pleasant,” Orochimaru hisses. “Kabuto wasn’t enough to entertain? He certainly seems to be now.”

Out of the corner of her eyes, she sees both Karin and Sarutobi engaging with the enraged man. There will be no relief from that quarter.

“You can’t fault me for wanting the main attraction,” Sakura replies, eyes darting around, searching for solutions and finding no answers. She is glad that Orochimaru is not at his peak, but, then again, neither is she.

His eyes regard her naginata with special interest. “A gift from Hiruzen,” he states, musingly. It isn’t a question. “He gave me my first sword. Did you know that I am a master of kenjutsu?”

“I’ve been made aware, yes,” Sakura answers, fear growing in the pit of her stomach.

He smiles lightly. “Let’s put those skills to the ultimate test. A kenjutsu battle between two pupils of the former Hokage.”

What follows is perhaps the most uncomfortable sight that Sakura has been forced to endure. Orochimaru opens his mouth, jaws unhinged and gaping, and a dark snake emerges. Wary, Sakura brings Sashimasu into a defensive position.

It is fortuitous that she does so as the snake, still in Orochimaru’s mouth, strikes out at her. Sakura
brings Sashimasu’s head up, flaring the chakra there brightly. The snake retreats and Sakura notices something lingering behind its fangs.

Orochimaru tuts at the snake, pulling a sword from its mouth. The snake returns into the man’s mouth and Sakura fights the urge to be violently sick. It is wrong to violate the laws of nature like this. While ninja are frequently credited with so-called miracles by civilians, ninja know the truth. There are strict limits to their abilities. To see Orochimaru so blatantly twist them…Sakura shakes her head forcefully.

“Sorry about that Sakura-chan,” he says. “My snakes are as enthusiastic as I am for a good fight. The old man couldn’t do much.” When Sakura’s face falls, he grins. “You caught that, did you? I believe you are the smart one on your team, much like I was.” He sighs, twirling the sword in a display of showmanship. “Isn’t it just dreary to be the smartest one in the room? Tsunade-hime could keep up a majority of the time but she just doesn’t have the perspective you know?”

Sakura frowns. “I’m never the smartest one in the room. My friends have strengths that bolster my weaknesses.”


Sakura shrugs. “I do not care about titles. Maybe it will cause my enemies to underestimate me.”

Orochimaru brushes her comment off, brandishing the katana. “This is the Kusanagi Sword,” he explains, smiling when her eyes light up with recognition. “You know your history well, don’t you? In that case, you know its properties.”

Sakura relies solely on muscle memory to dodge the extended strike. She rolls onto the balls of her feet, panting lightly. “You can extend and retract the blade,” she states, circling the man warily. Range does not matter to him as it does to her. “It follows commands, almost like a sentient being.”

“Better than a sentient being,” he corrects, well-nigh caressing the sword. “It, at least, has the decency of following my commands to their fullest extent. None of that free will rot that humans are so riddled and burdened with. Still, it would be unfair to use all of the Kusanagi’s abilities and leave your…Sashimasu was it? Leave your Sashimasu without its sting.”

Sakura tilts her head. “You will use it as a normal blade?”

“Of course,” he leers. “You can trust me.”

In all actuality, she cannot trust him, but what choice does she have? Her teacher is locked in a deadlock with Kabuto and she needs to be in range to even hope to land an attack on Orochimaru. She does not doubt that he will break his word, but, for now at least, she will play along.

As she moves closer, Orochimaru grins. “Quite good. Remember, you must bow, little protégé, before a true sword fight may commence.”

“I don’t have a sword,” she replies.

“Semantics,” he says, frown lighting his lips.

With a silent sigh, Sakura executes the ancient and traditional bow of Konoha, tracing back to before the founders’ time; back to Indra and Ashura, actually.

“There you go,” Orochimaru exclaims, playful visage carefully intact. Sakura fears for when the
mask drops and she sees the monster within. “That wasn’t too hard at all. Now, as the younger opponent, I will allow you the courtesy of attacking first.”

Sakura gogles for but a moment before performing a standard upswing. He blocks it easily, smiling. What follows is a bout of perfunctory strikes and blocks that prevent either from hitting the other. There is no chakra powering either of their weapons. Their fight is beautiful and graceful; a true battle between individuals who respect the use of kenjutsu. Still, there is no lethality or intent behind any of the attacks.

Sakura wonders why he is toying with her like this. With Sarutobi, it is obvious that he attacked without holding back. Is it curiosity that drives him? A desire to see Sarutobi’s newest apprentice in battle? Or perhaps, to understand the fighting style of the child who once bested him? It was a pocketful of wits and a hell of a lot of luck that got her the win last time. Whatever the case, Sakura is frustrated with this pantomime of battling. She knows there is no chance of winning against this man, no, monster, but she thinks she might be able to escape him.

Resolved, Sakura funnels chakra into her blade and, in an imitation of the Kusanagi itself, sends the blast away from the blade. Off-guard, it catches Orochimaru in his blade hand, forcing him to release the Kusanagi.

“How’s that for a sting?” Sakura mutters vindictively as she Shunshins backwards from him.

The playful mask has fallen away, replaced with the dark terror that lurks beneath. Yellow eyes glowing with rage, he yells, “Kusanagi!”

Sakura stumbles as something sharp pierces her foot. She looks down, surprised to see a snake with fangs sunk deep through her shoe into her skin. Sakura bats it away with Sashimasu bemusedly and watches as it returns to Orochimaru. They regard each other for a long moment before Sakura screams.

She has never felt a pain like this before. Fire licks up her leg, curling up her spine and resting there. Boiling. This is worse than the time Mikoto accidentally broke her wrist during training. It is worse than the time she was tag-teamed by Bee and Yugito. Saline drips from her eyes, an automatic response. She cannot think coherently and something rings in her ears, high and incessant. Somewhere, distantly she hears Orochimaru’s laughter.

“Poison,” she grits out, Shunshining away again.

She does not know her position but she knows she cannot be caught. In between jumps, she catches tidbits of Orochimaru’s speech.

“Naughty…naughty…Kabuto made it specially….lethal…unimaginable…."

Sakura shakes her head roughly, trying to focus on her leg. Her chakra is running haywire and Sashimasu disappears. Orochimaru is enjoying her pain and she doubts he will attack again. After all, the poison is killing her. She knows no medical ninjutsu. In fact, there is only one thing she knows to do.

Inner, she screams into the void of her mind.

I’m here, the voice replies sounding tired. I feel it.

We have to…cut off its access, Sakura says, still Shunshining wildly. She wonders briefly where Sarutobi is. I...my mind…I can’t…
I understand, Inner says sadly. I am you. Give me access to our chakra.

As Sakura does so, she feels her leg go curiously numb. It is a relief and a warning all in one. She is dying, she can feel it. Sakura is more grateful than ever for the voice in her head. She doesn’t know if preventing the poison’s spread is enough to save her. Sarutobi isn’t here to save her. She fears the worst for her teacher, knowing he would have helped the moment he heard her scream. Her chakra stores are nearly depleted.

Inner, she calls wearily.

I’m here, she replies and Sakura feels comfort seep into her bones.

“I wish…” her voice is raw and shredded. “I wish I could have…seen…” she trails off, eyes slipping shut.

“Sakura!” an unfamiliar voice screams desperately. It is deep and comforting even in the throes of anguish.

Sakura’s eyes flutter and she opens them to a familiar face. “Indra?” she asks, eyes welling with tears. It has been so long. “How? Am I…”

“No!” he replies, red eyes blazing. He is more corporeal than she has ever seen him. “No, you’re… you’re going to be fine.” His voice breaks. “You have to be fine.”

His warm hand brushes over her cheek, fingertips rough from training. Sakura grabs it, eyes wide.

“You…you’re…” she stutters.

He smiles slightly, anxiety high in his eyes as he brushes her bangs back. “You’ll be fine, Sakura,” he says. “Ashura!” he barks.

Ashura’s here?” she asks eagerly.

Indra hums, hopping to his feet. “I have to go now, Sakura. You’re going to be fine.” He raises her hand to his lips before leaving her.

Sakura, unable to move and barely able to stay awake, lays there. She is still in the clearing where the fight took place. She can hear the sounds of a fight going on but she can see nothing. Her surprise at Indra’s sudden appearance dampened the pain but now…

Sakura groans wetly as tears run down her face involuntarily. She does not even have the strength to brush them away.

“Sakura-chan!” a new voice cries out, unbearably anguished. Sakura marvels over the dulcet and musical tones. She can hear them. “Sakura-chan, I’m here,” Ashura declares as he falls to his knees beside her. He gently pulls her head into his lap, moving the braid to the side.

“Ashura,” she murmurs, starting as he gently rubs the tears away from her face. His fingertips are as rough as his brother’s. “It hurts,” she moans plaintively, too exhausted to feel embarrassed at the childishness in her voice.

“I know,” he replies roughly, eyes shining with tears. “It’s going to be okay Sakura-chan.” His gaze darts away for a moment, to the battle still raging. He bites his lip. “Sakura-chan, I have to ask something very hard of you right now.” She blinks once, their sign for yes. “Okay,” he says shakily. “I cannot Summon in this form. I need you to Summon Kyari. He’s best suited for the task.
Can you do that Sakura-chan?” he asks, rubbing her shoulders and hating that he is incapable of stopping her pain.

Sakura falls into her core with nary a sigh, surprised to find very little left. The block Inner constructed to keep the poison in her leg away from everything else is still intact. Sakura scrapes up the last specks of chakra left and returns to herself.

“Ashura, can you?” she asks with some embarrassment.

He gently lifts her hand to her mouth so she can bite her thumb. He guides her hand to the ground as she infuses it with the last of her chakra. After that, she is in and out as the large orange spectacled bear appears and greets them. She catches sight of the unconscious forms of Sarutobi-sensei and Karin already on the bear’s back. She smiles as Ashura gently places her on Kyari’s back.

“We…you,” he tells her. “Stay…”

The last thing Sakura sees is Ashura’s back as he runs off, getting smaller and smaller.

Then, then, her world goes up in flames.
The world is white and still when Sakura awakens.

She blinks rapidly, trying to clear away her disorientation as she raises a hand to brush the sleep from her eyes. Sakura knows from experience that her slumber was some amalgamation of natural sleep and medical ninjutsu. Her chakra stores are replenished but they feel… off somehow.

Sakura shakes her head roughly, moving fingers through incredibly oily hair.

“How long—?” she begins, her question disappearing into a fit of coughs.

Eyes watery, Sakura glances around the room, surprised to find no one present.

She knows she is back in Konoha and in the hospital.

The plan worked.

Sakura sighs, boneless with relief as she slumps back into the bed. Everything aches. She is well-used to lingering wounds (her right hand was forever cramping in Kumo because of the cold weather) but never has her body felt so brittle before. She feels like her skin and organs have melted away, leaving behind only her sun-dried, fragile bones. She is coming apart at the seams and she is arid like the Suna desert.

Sakura makes some sort of indecipherable sound as she falls into herself to take stock of the damages wrought by Kabuto and Orochimaru. She is mostly healed thankfully but her chakra network is going haywire.

Her chakra presents itself as a core of green that branches off into a multitude of twinkling lights through her body. Right now, the chakra around her leg is lit with blue, frenzied light.

“What?” she murmurs to Inner, studying the system with intrigue. “That’s where…” she trails off, flinching.

Inner understands immediately. “Yeah… it’s where the snake bit you. I was able to augment some of the pain but…” She shakes herself. “Orochimaru wasn’t lying when he called the poison potent. I can’t believe a worm like Kabuto could pull off something so complicated.”

Sakura hums, moving toward the blue lights. She reaches out, only to pull away in pain as the blue chakra dissipates.

“Sakura!” Inner says but it is too late.
Sakura is thrust out of her mind, gasping in agony. She places a hand to her heart, trying to regulate her breathing. She’s never been thrust out of her mind before. In fact, she cannot even communicate with Inner Sakura. And her leg…

Sakura whimper, biting down on her lip to keep from crying out. Inner must have blocked out the pain because, kami, it is…she’s never felt anything like it.

Sakura spends a few, long, painful moments trying to compartmentalize the pain to a bearable point. Finally, she gains the strength to struggle into a sitting position, careful of the wires attached to her arms.

She pulls back the sheet and stares down at her legs, thunderstruck.

Her right leg, where Orochimaru attacked her and the source of all her pain, is gone. White bandages wrap around the stump that is all that remains from about mid-thigh up to her hip. Shakily, Sakura reaches down and presses into the space where her leg should be.

Empty.

She screams.

Sakura wakes once more to off-white walls and the sterile scent of antiseptic. She is groggy and disoriented.

“We had to sedate you,” Tsunade says gruffly, moving into a seated position beside the girl. “You…weren’t supposed to find out that way.”

Sakura stares down at the place her leg should be, feeling less and less of a person. “There’s no great way to find out,” she finally replies.

There is something…not quite pity, but something akin to it in Tsunade’s eyes. Sakura resents it while greedily wanting more. She wants her pain to be recognized. She wants to be broken and jagged, just like her body currently is.

“Well.” Tsunade clears her throat. “You showed up at the gates of Konoha bleeding out atop an orange bear. We’ve been working on healing you for over half a month now. A combination of chakra exhaustion and that nasty little poison took a while.” Her eyes examine Sakura with something akin to wonder. “That poison…what exactly did you do?”

“What do you mean?” Sakura asks, knuckles bone white against her sheets.

“That poison should have killed you in minutes. Instead, I come across you nearly five hours later with all of the poison regulated to one part of your body. How exactly did you manage it?”

Sakura shrugs sullenly, staring down at the reminder of her failure. She survived because of desperation, a half-cocked plan, and the strength of her friends, not because she did anything worth noting. She smirks bitterly. She is the true heir of Sarutobi, brimming with sentimentality and weighed down by the burden of unfulfilled promises.

_I will not cry, I will not cry, I will not cry,_ she chants to herself, ignoring Inner Sakura’s attempts to comfort her.
“That poison…your leg…” Tsunade stops herself with a heavy sigh, regarding Sakura with serious brown eyes. “There was extensive damage to your right leg. The flesh was necrotic and the chakra coils were dead. It was unresponsive to any type of treatment.” She closes her eyes for but a moment before refocusing on Sakura. “We removed your right leg above the knee, around mid-thigh.”

Sakura shudders at the confirmation of her worst fears. Her eyes are hot and damp and her arms are shaky but she is ignorant to it all as she mumbles, “Why can I still feel it?”

She even reaches out, pressing down on the empty space and biting back bile.

“It’s called phantom pain,” Tsunade says gently, pulling the sheet back over her leg and hiding it from sight. “Your body does not understand the loss of limb and still send signals of pain to your brain.”

They sit in silence for a long time, Tsunade kindly turning a blind eye to Sakura’s meltdown.

It is much quieter than the first.

Tsunade finally asks, “Would you like to discuss your options?”

“Options?” Sakura returns, still sniffling.

Tsunade nods gently. “You are going to require a lot of physical therapy to regain mobility. We can have you outfitted with a personal prosthetic sometime in the next week, but for the next few days, you can either wear a hospital-issued one or use crutches.”

“Crutches,” Sakura replies.

“Alright. And your long-term plans?” Tsunade probes.

“What do you mean?” Sakura asks, still in shock. “My plans haven’t changed.”

“But…” Tsunade cuts herself off firmly. “Alright. I am going to leave you to rest. We’ll speak again later.”

Sakura watches as Tsunade leaves the room before throwing her sheet off once more. She stares down at the cleanly wrapped stump with morbid curiosity, prodding at it and poking it. It is there. It is real. Finally, she slumps down onto the bed once more, throwing an arm across her eyes as miserable tears fall once more.

What now? Inner asks, uncharacteristically subdued.

You saw Tsunade-hime, Sakura replies, curling in on herself slightly. She doesn’t think we can be a ninja anymore.

Inner makes a noise of disagreement.

I think she thinks we wouldn’t want to be ninja anymore. After all, we lost a limb.

Whatever the case, she was startled and she thinks we’re going to change our minds.

Have you ever heard of a limbless shinobi? Inner asks bitingy. No?Didn’t think so.

It…it doesn’t matter! Sakura replies hotly. I’ll be the first, just watch me!

Sakura …
No! I...I’ll be my own kind of shinobi.

Sakura drifts off to sleep with tears tacky on her cheeks and a frown on her lips as her dream seems further out of reach than ever before.

When she next wakes, an unexpected guest has infiltrated her room.

Uchiha Fugaku.

Sakura has had limited interactions with the man but she has heard enough to form a solid perception of him. He is a firm and just ruler of the Uchiha clan, sometimes too proud. He is an affectionate and loyal husband. He is an easily riled target as an uncle. He is a role model and obstacle as a father. Sakura has always thought that he did not know what to make of Sasuke’s team and chose to ignore them instead. Why he is here...well, that is something Sakura longs to find out.

“Uchiha-san,” she greets, voice rough with emotion. She is beyond caring at this point. “How did you get past the hospital staff? They are quite ferocious.”

His eyes lighten ever so slightly. Sakura is proud that her Uchiha reading skills have not gotten rusty in her time away from Konoha. “I can be quite persuasive if called for.”

“And meeting me called for it?” Sakura returns with a frown. “Why now?”

Why in this condition? is the unasked question that lingers in the air between them.

“I admit I have been curious about you since you were assigned to my son’s genin team. You were an unknown quandary, a first-generation ninja from a merchant clan. I thought you could be written off. Then my younger son began to show me new kata that his female teammate taught him. My wife and elder son began training with the team and I heard reports of dinners spent together. Alas, I was embroiled in clan meetings during that turbulent time and did not get a chance to join in on those dinners. I forgot my son’s teammates for a time.

“Then I received reports of the chūnin exams; of a genin who united some of the Konoha teams and fought Orochimaru off long enough for reinforcements to arrive.” He smirks. “The clans started to place bets on your performance.” Sakura flushes. “Imagine my surprise when Sasuke’s teammate forfeits her match to the Yamanaka heiress. I lost money on that bet, I’ll admit. Still, I was curious. This girl...she reminded me of a friend from long ago who was lost in the Kyuubi attack.

“After that, I heard about the feats this girl performed, subduing the Suna jinchūriki, uniting the Konoha youth once more in an apartment, and earning an apprenticeship with the former Hokage. There were other, more personal feats she wrought. My wife is happier and more connected with the youth of Konoha. My younger son is independent and no longer trailing in his brother’s shadow. My elder...well, he has friends outside the clan. So, I wished to meet the individual who managed to so change the world around me.”

Sakura stares up at the middle-aged man, a blush lighting her face. She is nearly positive that this is the most that any Uchiha (barring Shisui or Sasuke when on a sugar high) has ever said in one sitting. The fact that it is Fugaku, stoic and solemn Fugaku that says it is a miracle.

“Why now?” Sakura repeats, dreaded tears prickling her eyes. Humiliation burns, deep and hard, as she stares down at the reminder of her failure. “Is it pity?”
He lays his hand on hers, squeezing firmly. “No,” he tells her resolutely when she looks up at him. “It is not pity. I have wanted to speak to you since before you left on your diplomatic mission. I wanted to thank you. My family…the changes that you have started…I cannot thank you enough.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Sakura protests. “I just… I was just there!”

“And that was all that was needed,” he admonishes. “You were the…catalyst, I suppose. I know that the upcoming battle you face is one that I cannot begin to hope to understand,” he continues quietly, nodding to her leg. “Still, know that the Uchiha will back you in whatever decision you make.”

He moves to leave.

“Wait!” Sakura calls desperately, grabbing his hand. He looks at her questioningly. “Are they alright? The others?”

He nods, corner of his lips ticking up wryly. “They are well. You may have a riot on your hands if you aren’t released soon. I’m the only one who has been admitted thus far.” He winks and Sakura cannot help but gape. “Being clan leader has some benefits.”

He exits the room, whistling as Tsunade comes in.

“Well, at least I know where Itachi got his mischievousness,” Sakura mutters, still reeling from the conversation.

“Sakura-chan!” Naruto exclaims, running up to her and wrapping his arms around her like she is something to be treasured, to be cherished.

Sakura feels warmth suffuse her cheeks as she returns the hug and even pulls Sasuke into the mix. She is good to know that her team has remained the same, even after all this time. They have kept up through letters but it is different to see Naruto’s bright blue eyes and Sasuke’s ridiculous hair style in person. She breaks into a smile for the first time in a long while.

They break away and grin at each other.

“Are…are you alright Sakura?” Sasuke asks, looking very uncomfortable.

Sakura shifts her crutches and nods slightly. “I’m… I will be fine.”

Sakura moves to embrace Kakashi as well. He is stiff and obviously hesitant but he does pat her on her back. Sakura considers it an achievement. He’s getting used to affection and Sakura cannot be happier for him.

“How was Kumo?” Kakashi asks, diverting her teammates’ attention from her recent loss.

Sakura thinks she has never loved her sensei more.

“It was…very cold,” she says wryly, shifting her crutches into a more comfortable position. “I made some amazing friends though and I’m sure you guys will get to meet them soon enough.” Her eyes light up with cherished memories. “Darui gave me a matryoshka doll. I will show it to you when we get back to the apartment.”

Naruto grins brightly, wrapping an ever so gentle arm around her waist. He has always been the
best at navigating social situations and Sakura smiles. “Sasuke-teme has been prepping your favorite foods for days now, ever since you got back to the village.”

Sasuke’s ears are bright red as he mutters, “Shut up idiot!” He will not punch Naruto while he is so close to Sakura.

Kakashi laughs at them all, joining them on the venture home. Sakura does her best to ignore the prying and curious stares of the citizens of Konoha. An embarrassed and ashamed flush rises up the back of her neck. Thankfully her teammates are by her side.

As are Ashura and Indra.

Ashura and Indra, who she can still hear.

She stares at the ground to keep from gaping as the two speak over each other in their eagerness to greet her. She’s…she’s thought that their voices were a figment of her imagination, brought on by her near-death experience. To hear them and be fully conscious and aware…it is another thing entirely.

She flushes with happiness, ignorant of the prying gazes upon her as she is insulated by her team and her best friends.

(And their voices.)

Ino, to her undying credit, does not even notice Sakura’s leg (or rather, lack of one) as she throws herself into the girl’s arms. Sakura, quite unbalanced, falls to the ground holding her best friend. They stare at each other wide eyed, cornflower blue and ivy green, before devolving into giggles.

An ache that has been present since Sakura’s first wakening begins to recede.

“Hey,” she says scratchily, clearing her throat.

“Hi!” Ino exclaims, clinging to Sakura as she struggles to sit up with the girl on top of her. “We cooked your favorite meal for dinner!”

“We?” Sakura asks, raising a brow.

“Well, mainly Sasuke and Choji,” Ino says, “but you get the idea.”

“Are-are they here right now?” Sakura asks, gripping Ino’s arm in anxiety. She can’t see them right now. Not like this. Not with all of her flaws and imperfections on display for them to see.

Ashura and Indra eye her with concern.

“Yeah,” Ino replies, staring at her friend and rubbing her back soothingly. Unknown to Sakura, she glares at her team until they leave the two girls with relative privacy. Ashura and Indra stay. “I’m realizing now that this whole thing is really insensitive.”

Sakura’s breaths are short and panicked as she lays her forehead against Ino’s shoulder. She can’t let them see her faults, not when they are still so raw and exposed. She’s used to bottling her flaws up, bundling them together and hiding them away from everyone around her. What will her friends say when they see that she isn’t a good ninja? She is a nobody, from an unknown family who has pulled by on luck and grit.
Those things can only get one so far.

She’s reached her limit. Tears burn her eyes, bitter and hot as she does her best to regulate her shallow breathing. She hears Indra and Ashura shouting in concern but ignores it. She focuses only on the soothing hand at her back. Finally, Sakura pulls away, staring at the damp spot of saline and snot on Ino’s shirt with dismay.

“Sorry,” she murmurs, voice thick with her former panic.

Ino is watching her warily before she dries Sakura’s eyes. “Don’t worry about it. I… I was really insensitive about this whole thing. Everyone’s excited to see you but I didn’t even think about what you might want.” She smiles, sloppy and sad and everything that is the antithesis of Yamanaka Ino. “I’ve been selfish.”

“No,” Sakura replies fiercely, scrubbing her face on her shirt sleeves. “You just wanted to welcome a friend home. I…I overreacted.”

“Would you like me to ask them to leave?” Ino asks. “They’d be more than understanding.”

Sakura hesitates for a moment, gaze going to the Ōtsutsuki brothers. They stare back desperately, hands shaking with impotent rage. They cannot slay the doubts that plague her mind nor can they comfort her as Ino has. Never has either of them felt so powerless.

“I-I would like to see everyone,” Sakura says with a determined nod. She gathers her crutches and slowly, painfully begins to stand. “I’m sure I’ve missed out on a lot while I was away.” For a moment, Sakura feels an odd pang of loneliness and isolation before she shoves it away. “Anyway, I’m excited to hear about the things that didn’t make it into the letter.”

Ino nods, eyes full of concern. “How about you go wash up in my apartment before joining us?” Sakura smiles gratefully. “Would you like me to wait?”

“Nah,” Sakura replies, waving her on playfully. “Go harass Shikamaru.”

Ino wraps her in a hug before stepping into Team Seven’s apartment, leaving Sakura alone.

Well, not completely alone.

Indra and Ashura hover near her nervously, wanting to hug her but fearing to crowd her.

“How are you?” Ashura asks, hands wringing together.

Sakura will never tire of hearing their actual voices, smooth as silk to her ears. She grins genuinely at the two of them as she lopes over to Ino’s apartment and lets herself in. “I’m… well. It’ll get better,” she says, splashing her face with water.

“Is there anything we can do for you?” Indra asks, pleading for something, anything, he can do to ease her pain.

Sakura shakes her head before nodding. “Just…” She stares down at her stump of a leg. The bandages were removed before she left the hospital. The skin around the wound is scarred smooth, a different, darker color than the rest of her skin. It is a testament to Tsunade-hime’s healing skills that there are no lingering, weeping abrasions left by the poison. That she isn’t dead. Her pants’ leg hangs loose and free over what is left of her leg. She shuts her eyes tightly, refusing to listen to the prickle at the back of her eyes. “Just stay with me.”
“Always,” Ashura replies.

“Of course,” Indra says.

Both brush their hands over her hands and wrists, Ashura on the left and Indra on the right. She can feel their calluses scrape gently over her skin and she cannot contain a happy smile. It is not mere phantom sensation.

At least one good thing (two, counting their voices) came out of this.

Sakura enters the small party on crutches proudly as her best friends flank her on both sides.

“So…voices?”

Ashura and Indra glance at Sakura from their perches in her room. It is the first time that Sakura has really had a chance to breathe since being released from the hospital and she is taking advantage of the peace. (The welcome home dinner was fantastic, just a bit overwhelming.)

“So was I,” Ashura says, face pale. “You were…kami, Sakura. I thought you were dead. You were…you were there on the ground and your skin was greenish-purple…and that man…” His voice is deep and far angrier and more serious than Sakura has ever heard it. The hairs on her neck and arms stand on end. “That man dared to come near you.”

“And then I woke up,” Sakura says, wanting to keep them from dwelling.

“Then you woke up,” Indra replies. “We fought off Orochimaru and Kabuto as you escaped.”

“How’d you get back here?”

Indra shrugs lithely, glancing over at Ashura. “After you disappeared with the Summon, we were
tugged along maybe two minutes later?” he asks, looking at his brother.

“Doesn’t matter. We were able to demonstrate to Orochimaru what happens when he dares to mess with our friend,” Ashura says darkly, before brightening. “It was hilarious honestly. He and his little lackey had no idea where or what we are...their confusion as we threw them around was quite satisfying.”

Sakura snorts, imagining Orochimaru as a sort of ragdoll. “You said you were tugged along. What exactly do you mean?”

“It was like the way we were brought to you, one minute we were in one place and the next we were in another. We were brought back to your side,” Indra says.

“Wait! You didn’t go back to Naruto and Sasuke?”

“No,” Ashura says. “It appears we can anchor to you now as well.”

“I wonder why,” Sakura murmurs, laying back in bed and staring at the ceiling as if it holds all the answers.

“Maybe because we share Summons?” Ashura asks.

“Or perhaps because we’ve shared chakra,” Indra says.

“When did we share chakra?” Sakura inquires, sitting up again. The brothers glance away, refusing to look at her. “Guys,” she says warningly.

“When we...when we first found you. When we thought you were dead,” Indra says. “Sakura, you have to understand, we thought we lost you. Rationality...levelheadedness...everything went out the window. We, ah, still have chakra but we can’t usually use it to interact with the physical world. This time we could.”

“How?”

Indra shakes his head. “I don’t know. It’s like me punching Orochimaru in the Forest of Death...it just happened. I don’t know if our chakra did anything, if it helped, but we tried anyway.”

“It helped,” Sakura says quietly, looking at her leg. “I had very little chakra left and all of it was channeled into my leg. The voice in my head, Inner, she-controlled the pain. I would have burned through the chakra I had left before I reached Konoha. Whatever you gave me...it helped.”

“Does that explain the voices?” Ashura asks, eyes burning with her explanation.

“Oh,” Sakura replies, scratching her cheek idly. “That...I think is because of my state of being when you came across me.” She ignores their quizzical looks. “I was well on my way to dying when you guys appeared. I think...I think because I was so close to death, I became more like you both.” She shrugs, uncomfortable with the weight of their stares. “At least, that’s my hypothesis.”

Ashura makes a grunting noise that could be agreement or anger before he moves to sit beside Sakura. Sakura, understanding his need to assure himself that she is real and that she is there, merely smiles and pulls a squawking Indra down beside her.

For now, the nightmares are held at bay.

For now, she is happy.
She is outfitted with a prosthetic a few days later.

She goes alone, preferring to do this in private than in the company of others.

Sakura sits silently as Shizune describes her regimen as the prosthetist outfits her with her new leg. It is made of reinforced plastic, light grey in color. From the top to the knee, it is shaped very much like her opposite thigh. There is a hinge beneath where her knee once was and the prosthetic tapers into a thin metal line.

“There is padding on the prosthetic itself,” the prosthetist says, brushing long red hair out of her face. “It’ll minimize chafing but your leg will undoubtedly be sore for the first few months. You need to keep your leg and the prosthetic clean; especially if you plan to pursue strenuous activity.” She purses her lips like she dislikes the idea. Apparently, Shizune (or possibly Tsunade-hime herself) has informed her of Sakura’s plans. “You need to realize that healing takes time.”

Sakura glances at Shizune. “Isn’t there a technique that keeps muscles in their current state?” It is the way that medic nin keep shinobi at the hospital for long periods of time without allowing their muscles to atrophy. “Won’t it help me keep my muscles in shape as I adjust?”

Shizune shrugs. “I can certainly teach you the technique but I don’t believe it will do you much good.”

“Why?” Sakura asks, wondering if Shizune wishes to sabotage her.

“That technique is used to keep muscles in their current state; not to improve them. With this new prosthetic you are going to be learning to walk in a new and different way. Your current muscle structure…it will be useless in the face of your new gait. Your muscles will change and be used in new ways. It’s one of the main reasons your recovery will take so long.”

“You’re fitted,” the prosthetist says.

Sakura frowns down at her leg where the strap wraps up and around her hip. Tentatively, she stands and gasps at the pain. Still, she ignores the assistance of Shizune and the prosthetist and she painfully begins to move around the room.

It is…odd.

Aside from the chafing pain of this unfamiliar movement and weight on what is left of her leg, it is strange to move with something that is connected to her yet…not. She stumbles around slowly, concentrating to get her new leg to bend and move in the right way. Sakura realizes how much she took her ability to walk for granted. (She wonders if she’ll ever be able to move with grace again.)

She makes the circuit of the room before sitting once more, drenched in sweat. Shizune wasn’t lying; she uses groups of muscles she has never used before in such a way. “So…what now?” she asks.

Shizune clicks her tongue, coming close and placing a hand on her leg. Warm chakra floods into Sakura’s leg, soothing her aches and inflammation. “Tsunade-hime has assigned you a D-ranked, long-term mission. You’ll be reporting in twice a week for check-ups and physical training. You’ll meet with me or with Kyoto-san here,” she says, nodding to the prosthetist.

Sakura’s lips quirk in a wry smile. “Are you sure funds can be allocated for this? It’s not much of a mission.”
Shizune stares at her, eyes flinty. “Tsunade-hime knows the importance of medical care and recovery. If anyone disagrees…well, they can discuss it with Tsunade-hime after a spar.” Sakura blanches. “That tends to quiet any of the dissenters.” Besides,” Her eyes go soft and warm and Sakura can understand why Shizune is the most requested medic nin in the hospital. “You lost your leg in the service of Konohagakure. The least we can do is help you get back on your feet.”

Sakura snorts, leaning forward. “Could you help me to my feet right now? I have a lunch date but I’m not sure I can stand.”

Shizune laughs (as Sakura hoped she would) and assists her.

There are good days and there are bad days.

On the good days Sakura is in the thick of things; meeting with friends, exploring Konoha, and just being involved. On some of her good days Sakura hunts down Kumo immigrants and gives them the native seeds Shiki gave her. Her efforts are met with surprise and happiness and Sakura has since learned how to keep her balance if someone enthusiastically hugs her. She is glad to interact with the community, meeting Kumo natives of all ages and hearing their stories about Konoha and Kumo both.

On good days she writes letters and has long conversations with the spirits and wheedles genjutsu techniques out of Mikoto or Kurenai. She is a flurry of motion, resolutely ignoring the pain that radiates from her thigh up her hip to her spine. Her friends smile and laugh along with her, glad to see her so happy in the face of her adversity.

Those are the good days.

On bad days, Sakura finds it hard to pull herself out of bed. When she moves (if she moves), it is listless and thoughtless, motion for the sake of motion. It is not uncommon for Naruto or Ino to guide Sakura into a chair and just sit with her and speak of everything and nothing. On the days that she stays in bed, Ashura and Indra stay with her, often sitting or lying by her. Sometimes Ashura helps her to Summon Tamaki so she can just cuddle. On these days, Sasuke or Hinata bring her meals.

The worst days are the ones where she dares to forget.

She forgets her loss, perhaps for a moment, perhaps for a while and when she remembers…

It’s bad.

When she remembers, she is caught in the moment once more. (Pale hands, distorted strange tongue, turning the laws of nature on their head, wrongness, scent of death and carnage, an innate, intimate understanding of the only thing that awaits her…D E A T H.) When she escapes the memories, Sakura often finds herself curled in a small ball, breathing all too rapidly.

Still, the effects linger.

Sakura wonders how other shinobi handle it; knowing, resolving themselves unto death. She did not expect to escape Orochimaru alive. In fact, there are still moments where she thinks she might be in the Land of Hot Water, just trapped in some sort of twisted genjutsu or even decomposing on the forest floor.
Usually these attacks come when no one is around and she fights through them alone but today she is not as lucky. She is in her room, speaking with Ashura and Indra while brushing her hair when it happens. Her brush is a kunai and all she can see is the death in Orochimaru’s golden eyes.

When she comes to, Sakura is cradled in Indra’s arms as he rocks her back and forth soothingly. He is humming some tune she doesn’t really recognize, something ancient and weighty. In the background, she hears Ashura causing a scene but she cannot focus on that right now.

Instead, Sakura leans further into Indra’s chest, inhaling deeply. His body rumbles around her and she can feel the music as he continues to hum. He is cold to the touch (unlike before), still not fully there but there is the scent of pines and smoke and Konoha. She closes her eyes and sinks into him, finding solace in his calmness. Finally, she centers herself and pulls away, instantly mourning the loss.

“Hey,” she says shakily, smiling a little lopsidedly.

“Sakura!” Ashura exclaims, dropping to his knees beside them and hesitantly putting a hand on her cheek. She leans into his cold hand with a tired smile. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” she replies, refusing to look at them.

“It’s happened before hasn’t it?” Indra asks, red eyes bright and keen.

Her lack of response is answer enough.

“Sakura-chan,” Ashura says, slipping his hand under her chin and tilting her head to look her in the eyes. She meets sad, dark brown eyes. “Please.”

“It…it happens sometimes, when I remember. I forget myself; where I am, who I am with,” Sakura says quickly, trying to get through it. “I am back fighting for my life against Orochimaru.”

“What can we do to help you?” Indra asks.

Sakura hesitates for a moment. “I just…don’t feel safe anywhere. Even here. There’s just…there’s no place that’s mine alone.” She sees their alarmed and slightly hurt looks. “No! I don’t want you guys to leave! This is your space too. I’m always happy to have you guys here.”

The brothers exchange looks.

“It wouldn’t be a bother if you had us leave,” Indra says, suddenly uncertain and cautious. “We’d understand.”

Sakura shakes her head emphatically. “No. This is your place too.”

Ashura begins surveying the room, moving toward Sakura’s closet. There are two in the room. He moves to pull the handle and grunts in frustration when his hand passes through it. Sakura watches in confusion as he continues to try to no avail.

“Give me a hand?” he asks finally, ignoring Indra’s laughter.

Sakura uncurls and stands, making her way over to him and disregarding the way that Indra hovers over her protectively. She pulls the closet open and raises a brow at Ashura.

He grins back at her, ignoring her incredulity. “We’re going to make a spot just for you,” he declares, reaching down to pull out a pair of shoes. His hands pass through them. A flush rises up
his neck and ears. “Ah, will you grab them?”

Sakura laughs and obliges Ashura’s whims. When the closet is empty of books and clothes, Ashura steps inside, pulling Sakura along. It is a tight squeeze with the both of them and Sakura cannot help but giggle at how ridiculous they must look.

Indra is quick to assure her that they do indeed look ridiculous.

“What is this?” Sakura asks, pushing away from Ashura.

“This is your safe place,” he replies, staring down at her earnestly over their joined hands. “Think about it. There’s enough room for you to sit down, spread out some pillows, and read or meditate or-whatever! This is your place.”

Sakura’s smile softens and she stares up at her friend with gratitude. Ashura has given her an immeasurable gift in his sincere attempt to comfort her. She steps forward and wraps her arms around his waist, squeezing slightly as she rests her head against his shoulder. There is something still intangible about him but he is still there and mostly solid.

Sakura steps back, unable to keep from smiling. Ashura stares down at her with an unfathomable look.

Indra interrupts the moment by yanking Ashura from the closet. “It’s her space,” he explains when Ashura turns on him with a bewildered and angry look.

Sakura ignores their bickering as she pulls pillows and blankets from the bed into the closet. She grabs a scroll, flips the light switch, and closes the closet door, smiling softly as Indra and Ashura’s voices drift to her ears.

Being able to hear them will never get old.

She glances down at her scroll, as happy tears build in her eyes. For the first time in a long time, she is at peace.

Sakura encounters Karin and Sai on the same day.

As Sakura is leaving the hospital following her biweekly checkup/physical therapy session, she comes across a shock of familiar red hair. She pauses in the crowded lobby, turning to regard Karin fully. She is in the midst of a passionate argument with Shizune, crossing her arms over the thin, mint green hospital gown as her voice rises shrilly. Sakura grimaces sympathetically; the hospital gowns barely pass for clothing.

She approaches them, hoping that Karin will appreciate a familiar face. Shizune smiles, relief evident in her face when she catches sight of Sakura.

“Haruno-kun!” she greets enthusiastically. “How nice to see you today!”

Karin turns, acerbic remark dying on her lips when she sees Sakura. Her face flushes a deep red as Sakura raises a hand in a slight wave.

“It’s good to see you again under better circumstances, Karin,” Sakura says, smiling.

Karin doesn’t reply, staring down at her feet in embarrassment.
“Haruno-kun, could you remind Karin-kun that she needs to rest?” Shizune asks, taking advantage of Karin’s sudden silence. The girl has been...difficult since her awakening. Only the most senior of doctors (such as Shizune) are able to handle her.

“Are you injured?” Sakura asks, eyes wide with concern, as she takes in Karin’s fully bandaged arms and legs.

“Ah, n-no,” Karin finally replies, still looking away bashfully.

“Why are you still in the hospital then?”

It is Shizune’s turn to flush. “We’re studying some of her chakra abnormalities. Tsunade-hime has requested that she stays nearby for the testing and since she’s...well, not a native of Konoha, the hospital is the most convenient. The tests are rather...exhausting.”

Sakura watches as Karin’s face falls ever so slightly and she comes to a decision. “Could I take her out for lunch? I know staying in the hospital makes me stir-crazy.” Sakura pauses, looking askance at Karin. “As long as you want to, that is.”

Karin makes a squeaking noise that sounds like assent.

Shizune smirks; this is the first time Karin has been speechless during her entire stay.

“That’ll be fine,” Shizune says. “Let us grab some more appropriate clothing and the two of you can go.”

Sakura takes a seat in the lobby, standing when Karin emerges in green scrubs a few sizes too large. Sakura decides they need to do some shopping after lunch.

“I know food at the hospital can taste a little...” Sakura trails off tactfully.

“Like shit?” Karin says, adjusting her glasses with a sigh.

Sakura snorts in surprise. “You’re not wrong,” she comments wryly, grinning at the other girl.

Karin flushes once more, to Sakura’s confusion. “So where are we getting lunch, anyway?”

Sakura grins. “It’s a surprise.”

“This is delicious!” Karin exclaims, taking another bowl from Ayame.

It is her eleventh.

Sakura smiles, glad that her friend is enjoying herself. She would be concerned about possible malnutrition, but Sakura knows the medical ninja take care of such necessities. Karin just really, really likes Ichiraku.

“She-chan!” a voice calls.

She turns, smiling as her teammates approach along with her replacement. “Naruto, Sasuke, Sai, how are all of you?” She notices their clothes are rumpled and singed. “Survival training?” she guesses.
“Survival training,” Sasuke grumbles, grabbing the seat beside her.

“Oh!” Sakura says, kicking herself for her poor manners. “Guys, this is Karin. Karin, these are Sai, Sasuke, and Naruto. Sasuke and Naruto were on my genin team and Sai joined them when I apprenticed with Sarutobi. Karin was essential in our fight with Orochimaru.”

They exchange basic greetings before falling into silence as they all sit down with some ramen.

“How are you, cripple?” Sai asks, in that blandly disconcerting way of his.

Everyone stiffens as Sakura inhales sharply. Out of her peripherals, she sees Ashura and Indra go eerily still.

Distantly, Sakura hopes that they don’t do anything rash.

Still, she has bigger things to worry about. Sakura fights to keep her breathing even and calm even as her heart feels like it is beating out of her chest. With one word, Sai has managed to stab a still sensitive and smarting wound. She wonders if her friends label her the same way.

Cripple.

Failure.

Weak.

She shakes herself, trying to let the name run over her like rainwater. She sincerely doubts that Sai is even aware of his social faux pas.

Surprisingly, it is Karin who comes to her defense. “What is your problem, you pasty bastard?” Her teeth are bared and her red eyes glow with rage. This fierce protector is starkly different from the shy and tentative side Sakura saw only moments before. Sakura fears she will physically assault the oblivious boy. “Sakura hasn’t done anything to earn your name-calling!”

Sakura clears her throat, gaining the attention of the pale, bemused boy. Through the veil of hurt and anger that enshrouds her, Sakura experiences a sharp, bleeding ache for this lost boy. He understands so little. “Sai-chan,” she says firmly, staring into bewildered dark eyes. “It is not nice to call people names.”

“The book I read told me that nicknames are a symbol of familiarity. I use them with the other members of Team Seven,” Sai says and Sakura thinks she detects a note of hurt in his voice.

Sakura sighs, unsure of a delicate way to approach Sai’s conditioning. It is so thorough; he is incapable of understanding his own emotions. Yet, because of the disconnect, his emotional state is incredibly fragile.

“Look Sai-chan, why don’t you go back to the first nickname you gave me? It was much more… fitting,” she says with a slight grimace.

“Alright, Ugly,” he says and Sakura thinks that the slight quirk to his lips is genuine.

“Great, Sai-chan,” she replies, ignoring the indignant squawks of her teammates, Karin, and the brothers. She smiles as Ashura begins extolling her physical attributes and Indra chimes in with his own opinion. “Let’s eat.”
For whatever reason, Sai has become attached to Sakura and follows her around like a talkative and curious shadow.

Whenever he isn’t away on a mission or reporting to Root, she often finds him sketching in the kitchen or sitting on the floor outside her bedroom. She should find it intrusive but Sai’s social awkwardness and abrupt childishness keep it from overwhelming her.

Instead, Sakura invites Sai into her home, elbowing Naruto when he bemoans his fate. She gets him to carry the basket in the markets and fills their bookshelves with books on social interaction. (She can never keep from smiling when she finds him reading them.) Sakura patiently answers even the most inane of questions and starts to help Sai determine his likes and dislikes.

(She keeps the kitchen stocked of pineapples and avocados alongside Sasuke’s tomatoes and Naruto’s ramen.)

It is on a lazy Sunday morning that Sai invites her over to his apartment. Sakura is surprised and flattered; none of Team Seven (outside of Kakashi-sensei possibly) has been to Sai’s home. Honestly, Sakura has never even really thought about where Sai might live. His apartment is small and nondescript, full of standard, somewhat shoddy furniture that came with the apartment. It is pristine and looks like no one has inhabited the room for years.

Except for the drawings and paintings that cover the walls.

Most are beautiful, realistic, black-and-white depictions of different scenes. Sakura recognizes the Hokage Tower, the Konoha gates, Kakashi’s dogs, and Team Seven’s usual training grounds. (Sakura is inexplicably happy that Team Seven is so important to Sai.)

Sakura’s favorite piece is the only one that includes color.

It is a depiction of dusk, those uncertain twilight hours after the sun has set but the light still lingers. Pinks and purples and golds streak across the sky and the grayish-blue clouds. Unlike his other works, the strokes are hesitant and unsure. It is the most human of all his pieces.

“This is beautiful,” Sakura says, still entranced.

Sai sidles up beside her, frowning thoughtfully at the painting. “This…” He stops for a moment. His voice is quiet when he begins once more. “This is what I...feel when I am around you.”

Sakura turns to him, heart swelling at the confusion that knits his brow. She knows this is a huge step in Sai’s rehabilitation into society. She doesn’t even stop to think her actions through; Sakura throws her arms around his waist. He doesn’t return the hug and Sakura cannot help wondering how long it has been since he last felt positive human touch.

“Thank you,” she says, squeezing him.

He gently pats her head where it is lodged against his shoulder.

“You’re welcome?” he asks, still unsure of social pleasantries.

Sakura pulls away with a happy nod, coming to a split-second decision in that moment.

Sai moves into a two-bedroom apartment down the hall the next day.

Two days later (after a lot of discussion and explanation), Karin moves into the empty room.
Sakura continues to train with Sashimasu.

Her hip aches from constant overextension but she suffers through the pain. It reminds her that this is real and that she is still alive. Her prosthetic is light and clumsy, making even the simplest of exercises strenuous and exhausting on both physical and emotional levels.

After thirty minutes, Sakura gingerly sits with a scowl as she rubs her upper thigh and hip down in a futile attempt to prevent it from cramping in a few hours. She can’t help but remember that in Kiri she was able to spar full-out with Chōjūrō for at least an hour and a half. Now…

Now it is difficult to even get out of bed on some days.

Sakura understands the signs, hell, they are practically textbook symptoms: constant exhaustion and an emptiness that threatens to swallow her alive. Many shinobi wrestle through it in wartime and in the years of aftermath.

She is depressed.

She knows it, but she understands it from a distance, incapable of feeling anything but burning apathy and niggling guilt over the fact. Depression is much more accepted in the civilian world; after all, emotions are seen as a weakness to the perfect shinobi. (Unfortunately, shinobi prove to be the most human of all.) There are treatments in the civilian world: medicines, therapies, and people trained in the matter. Tsunade-hime is the first to implement any sort of processes for depressed shinobi, but the stigma still remains, threatening to drown Sakura in her own ineptitude. (Secretly, in her darkest moments, she wishes it would, if only to make everything stop.)

“Hey,” a voice exclaims, startling Sakura from her increasingly morose thoughts.

Sakura struggles into a more acceptable seated position as she looks up at an all too familiar face. “Shisui,” she greets with a smile that she genuinely means. She hasn’t seen him since her return. “How are you?”

He flops down beside her in an ungraceful manner, removing his shoes, stretching out his legs, and curling toes in the tall grass. “Pretty great. I’ve been in Kiri for nearly a month running errands for the Mizukage.” He rolls his eyes playfully and Sakura wonders what top-secret missions he’s actually been up to. “I heard only good things about you while there.”

Sakura scoffs, staring down at the glaring reminder of her inadequacies. “I’m sure.”

He purses his lips together as he watches her fold in on herself. “I’m serious. Chōjūrō wouldn’t stop singing your praises, though it was hard to understand through all the stammering. Even Ao said you were ‘pretty good for Leaf scum.’”

“Ao said that?” Sakura asks, mystified. She has always thought the man hated her.

“Considering that I went out of my way to antagonize him every chance I got, he probably remembers you as a saint.”

They lapse into silence and Shisui continues to observe Sakura. He has, of course, known about the INCIDENT (all capitals because it is a very big deal) as everyone is calling the clusterfuck that was the Professor and Sakura’s return from Iwa. Itachi, Mikoto, Sasuke, and even Fugaku had been in quite a tizzy about it. Shisui was not present for the event but he was told the story: Sakura, Sarutobi-sama, and an unknown girl appeared suddenly at the gates of Konoha, unconscious.
astride a huge bear. The medic nin fought valiantly but still lost most of Sakura’s leg. The Professor had been forced into retirement because of the lasting damage to his chakra coils. The man meekly complied to Shisui’s surprise. Sarutobi Hiruzen is infamous for his stubbornness.

Still, his former prized apprentice apparently is directly to blame for his current apprentice’s state of being.

It is more than enough to break him. (Sarutobi Hiruzen has received the lion’s share of misery and pain in his long lifetime. If he is deserving of it is anyone’s guess.)

Shisui pushes a hand through his curly hair and asks, “What’s got you down today sunshine? Usually you’d be talking my ears off about weird Kiri traditions, like everyone wearing skirts…I mean kilts whenever possible or—” He shudders dramatically. “—the apparent delicacy that is frog legs.”

Sakura glances at him incredulously. “Don’t play dumb Shisui; you’re much more intelligent than you often act.”

He hums, not in agreement or in disagreement. “How badly is the prosthetic bothering you?”

“A lot,” she mutters, color high in her cheeks. “It’s too light and keeps getting in the way and it makes me use muscles that I never had to use so strenuously before.”

Shisui nods, pulling a curl out of his face. “I understand.”

“How--?” she cuts herself off, mortified. Of course Shisui understands. He lost his eye in the Konoha Crush.

Sakura releases a wet chuckle, falling back and staring at the passing clouds. She is beginning to understand their appeal to Shikamaru. “We’re quite the pair aren’t we? Losing body parts to Orochimaru to protect Sarutobi-sama.”

“But morbid there, Sakura-chan,” Shisui replies. “It was a bitch to try to adjust my fighting style with my new perception.” He rubs a finger along the bandages over his right eye socket. “Bandages were itchy too.”

Sakura looks at the fabric now. It appears to be silk. “Not so itchy anymore?” she asks dryly.

Shisui flushes slightly, color marring his high cheekbones. “I appreciate nice things. There is nothing wrong with that.”

“Uchiha breeding through and through,” Sakura teases.

“I’ll show you Uchiha breeding,” he exclaims, launching himself at her.

They tussle about for a few minutes, ending finally with Sakura pinning a giggling Shisui to the ground. Sakura has learned three things in their playful bickering.

First, it feels good to talk about her loss and even joke about it instead of skirt around it. There is something freeing in openly addressing it.

Second, Shisui does not treat her like she is broken or fragile or spun of glass and Sakura is eternally grateful. Her friends have been on eggshells around her and she hates it.

The third? Shisui is ticklish.
“That Uchiha pampering has made you soft, Shisui.”

“Only because you take advantage of my one and only weakness.”

Sakura quirks a brow. “We’re shinobi. It’s what we do.”

He huffs petulantly and says sanctimoniously, “I give up, Sakura-sama. You have bested the Great and Powerful Shisui.”

Sakura snorts, rolling off of him onto the ground once more.

“How’d you deal with it?” she asks quietly, studiously studying the bright sky. “Not being whole.”

“It wasn’t easy,” he replies honestly. “A part of me hated myself, Itachi, and Sarutobi-sama. I dealt with a lot of doubt. What if I was faster? What if Itachi figured out Orochimaru’s ploy? What if Sarutobi-sama recognized Orochimaru’s obsession with the Sharingan?”

“Orochimaru stole your eye?” Sakura interrupts, disgusted by the very idea.

“He tried. He actually did manage to remove it,” Shisui smiles bitterly, gaze lost in a memory that Sakura cannot see. “We…destroyed it.”

Sakura reels from the explanation. No one really knows what happened within the dome aside from the aftermath. Four ANBU dead and Shisui bleeding from an empty eye socket. Shisui and Itachi refuse to speak of that day and Sarutobi never let anything slip even during their travels.

“The aftermath was the hardest,” Shisui admits. “My chakra paths were disrupted and I almost overloaded my other eye the first time I used the Sharingan.” His eye flickers red and the tomoe pattern unique to him spins lazily. “Obviously I figured it out. it was the…head stuff that was the worst.”

“Head stuff?” Sakura asks, nose crinkling in thought.

“I’m not the best at explaining these things.” His brow furrows. “I was fine with the physical training; it gave me something to focus on. The mental stuff was worse. I couldn’t sleep, I had panic attacks, I kept remembering white fingers gripping my face and…” he trails off with a shiver.

“Yeah. My parents and Itachi caught on and forced me to see Fugaku-sama.”

“What did he do?” Sakura asks, thinking of the stoic man who spoke to her of admiration and change.

Shisui snorts. “He dragged me to T&I.”

“He what?” Sakura yelps, blanching at the very thought. Why would Fugaku take Shisui to Torture and Interrogation unit?

Shisui waves his hands frantically. “No! No! Not like that! T&I has a lot of psychologists in it. They didn’t hurt me!”

Sakura sighs in relief, relaxing slightly. “So…what happened in T&I?”

“I received the help I needed. Their best psychologists are Yamanaka but you don’t have to let them into your mind. You can just…talk. They can help you sort your thoughts and feelings and just get out of your own headspace.”

They fall into comfortable silence as Sakura wrestles with herself. She wants to be the person she
used to be, not this…not-person who feels too much and nothing at the same time. She wants to be safe when she’s alone with only her thoughts as company.

“Sometimes,” she whispers, lungs burning as her rational, fearful side screams for her to shut up. Inner Sakura is silent as a grave. “Sometimes I want to fall asleep and never wake up.”

The unnatural stillness following her admission is unnerving. She looks up into Shisui’s blazing eye. His face lacks all of its earlier frivolity as he stares down at her, more serious than even the encounter in the Forest of Death.

“Get up,” he demands.


He doesn’t respond, he acts. Sakura squeaks as she is easily lifted and cradled in strong arms. The familiar sickening swoop in her stomach tells her that Shisui has just Shunshined somewhere. She smacks him lightly in the chest as he releases her.

“Don’t ever do that without my permission again,” she says, bending over to try to contain her roiling stomach.

“Sorry,” he replies, completely unrepentant as he rubs soothing circles into her back.

Finally feeling in control of herself, Sakura stands, only to feel the urge to vomit bubble up all over again.

Shisui has brought her to the T&I building.

“You have no right!” she hisses, hurt by Shisui’s indiscretion.

“I have all the right!” he replies, eye red and spinning. “You need help Sakura and kami be damned if I don’t do something!”

“Shisui,” she says hesitantly and his anger melts away.

“Sorry, just…I don’t want to see you going through the same thing as me. Please Sakura…I want to help.”

Sakura sighs, deflating as the anger falls away from her. She hates fighting with friends.

“I’ll meet with someone,” Sakura says. “Just…could you come with me?”

Shisui laces his fingers through hers. “Every step of the way,” he promises as they step into the building.

Kakashi proves to be very protective and involved in Sakura’s recovery.

It is jarring in many ways, as Sakura remembers her genin teacher as a kind but distant mentor. Now, however, he is attentive and caring, often in an indirect sort of way.

(Sakura wonders if the change was sparked by her teammates or by her loss.)

It becomes a common occurrence to find interesting, obscure history books in the living room or
scrolls detailing exercises that lessen the strain on her leg. She always knows they are from Kakashi because of the unsubtle way he brings it up in conversation to make sure she likes her gifts. Frankly, she finds it adorable.

Sakura’s favorite thing is the way Kakashi takes the time to just be together with the team. (Well, she also loves it when he teaches her new genjutsu and ninjutsu techniques.) Sakura loves the family-style dinners where Sasuke and, surprisingly, Sai cook meals as Naruto entertains with his antics and Kakashi, in turns, heckles and soothes his students. Sakura is always in the thick of it; helping Sasuke with difficult recipes, gently correcting Sai’s social missteps, laughing along with Naruto’s stories, and trying to steal the ever-present orange book from Kakashi’s hands. She knows he isn’t actually reading it, but it is the thought that counts.

It is during one of these dinners that Sakura gets the sinking suspicion that Kakashi is up to something.

He isn’t doing anything particularly out of the ordinary but from the constant eye crease Sakura can tell that he’s in a mischievous mood. After all, there are very few tells that the team can read his moods by so they’ve mastered the eye creases. The upward curve of his eye and the wicked cock to his eyebrow tells Sakura that trouble is afoot.

Sakura’s anxiety ratchets to all new levels as the meal ends and Pakkun appears in a puff of smoke. Even though it has been years since her last “survival exercise” with Kakashi-sensei, she hits the floor alongside her terrified teammates.

“We told you that survival training can’t take place in our house!” Naruto yells from under the table.

Pakkun laughs as Kakashi makes a noise of protest. “You really traumatized them didn’t you?” Pakkun asks.

“They’re just dramatic,” Kakashi says, sulk clear in his voice.

“You can never be too careful,” Sasuke says, peeking out from behind the couch.

“Spineless is right,” Sai says.

Sakura tentatively glimpses up to the table and gasps. Sitting beside Pakkun is a cat that is simultaneously the most gorgeous and ugly cat she has ever seen. It is a large, fluffy black and white cat with one grey eye and one starkly purple eye. Its face is squashed and seems to be in a constant state of grimness. It lacks one ear and the other appears to be heading the same way.

Naruto, Ashura, and Sasuke watch her warily as Indra stares at the cat and Sai pulls out his sketchbook to capture their expressions.

Sakura is in love.

“She’s yours,” Kakashi says, watching Sakura’s face with delight.

“What?” she asks, reaching out a tentative hand to the cat.

The cat purrs, closing her heterochromatic eyes as Sakura scratches under her chin.

“The pack found her the other day, heckling some neighborhood dogs. She’s a smart one. She escaped the pack three times before they finally managed to corner her,” Kakashi says. “With her intelligence and prickly attitude, I thought she’d fit in around here just fine.”
“That doesn’t account for Naruto,” Sasuke mutters, only to receive a quelling look from Sakura.

“Her name is Tsukiki,” Pakkun says, watching the cat warily. He remembers her claws quite well. “She says the pink one may have the honor of calling her Kiki. She enjoys this abode and claims it as her own.”

Sakura grins, pulling the cat into her lap. Kiki is huge and Sakura cuddles her close. “She’s welcome to it,” she says, ignoring the simultaneous groans from Sasuke and Naruto.

“That was the plan,” Kakashi says, pride obvious in his stance.

Sakura places the disgruntled cat on the ground to let her explore and moves to give Kakashi a hug. (Sakura notices the way that Kiki stares at Indra in that affronted way that only cats can and wonders.) He doesn’t freeze this time, instead placing a hesitant hand on her back.

He’s learning.

(All of them are.)

Sakura eventually runs into Ibiki during her time at T&I.

Her therapist is a distant relative of Ino’s with cropped brown hair and dark blue eyes. Mitsuki is dry and blunt and Sakura loves her for it. (Sakura is sometimes reminded of her own mother as she interacts with Mitsuki. The thought burns sweetly and Sakura locks it away deep down inside herself.)

She is actually leaving an emotionally charged meeting when she bumps into Ibiki quite literally. (Emotional exhaustion never fails to dull her senses, no matter how Ashura and Indra scold her.)

Sakura pulls away from a black, leather trench coat, looking up and up and up into a grizzled and scarred face that could be made of stone. Morino Ibiki, the chûnin exam proctor and T&I’s most infamous and effective interrogator.

“Sorry,” she mutters, stepping away. She still feels residual shame over being seen by someone she is even remotely associated with when she is attending therapy. Sakura tamps the feeling down; therapy does not make a person weaker, in fact, it makes her all the stronger.

He stares at her like he is trying to place her.

“chûnin exams,” she clarifies.

His eyes light with recognition. “Ah! You’re the only one who received a perfect score on the written portion without additional help.” It isn’t exactly a compliment. Ninja regard the skills of espionage and sabotage much more highly than book knowledge.

“That’s me, I suppose,” Sakura replies.

“The pacifist, right?”

“Is that my nickname everywhere?” Sakura groans.

“Not the most ninja-like of actions were they? People remember that which puts them off-guard. How have you even survived the ninja world with that pink hair?”
Sakura arches a brow in return. If she can handle Hoshigaki Kisame as an enemy, she can handle Morino Ibiki as an ally. “You’re not exactly subtle yourself. Seven feet tall, riddled with apparent scars, how do you manage?”

Sakura suddenly realizes that the room is deathly silent and wonders if she made a huge mistake. Ibiki’s face and scars shift into a wide, slightly terrifying grin as he chuckles.

Sakura breathes a sigh of relief just as a heavy hand comes down hard on her shoulder. She wheezes, wheeling to regain her balance and rolling her shoulder with a wince.

“Oh, I like you,” Ibiki declares, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and leading her… somewhere. “You’ve got spunk. Most of your generation is full of the soft-hearted and lily-livered. You…you’ve got grit.”

“We’re ninja,” Sakura replies simply, uncomfortable with the incredulous looks directed their way. Is it truly so strange to see Ibiki interact with someone who isn’t a member of the T&I unit or being interrogated?

He shakes his head, leather-clad arm guiding her down into the “crypt” as people call the holding cells for enemies of Konoha. People and secrets come in, but secrets alone ever come out. “Your generation doesn’t know the meaning of the word. Not their fault,” he adds upon seeing her defiant expression, “they just aren’t children of war. You though…Oi! Yamanaka!” he exclaims, catching sight of Inoichi as he exits one of the examination rooms. “Where’ve you been hiding this one? She’s got bite.”

“Sakura-chan!” Inoichi greets, gawping at the disparate duo. “What are you doing down here?”

She shrugs helplessly, gesturing to the hand on her shoulder.

“Morino,” Inoichi says, more serious than Sakura has ever seen him. “Let Sakura-chan be. She’s needed elsewhere.” (Technically a lie but Sakura is more than willing to play along.)

Sakura has never seen a middle-aged man pout before.

It is a horrifyingly hilarious experience.

Ibiki’s lips pucker in a sulk, scars stretching into new shapes.

“But Yamanaka-chan!” he mocks, pulling Sakura closer. She’s surprised that he has avoided her hair spikes thus far but he is a professional ninja. “There’s so many extraction techniques that I could teach her!”

Inoichi blanches. “Absolutely not. Go on Sakura-chan; I need to speak with Morino about boundaries.”

Sakura shrugs out from under Ibiki’s grip, trotting back to the stairs.

“See you around, pacifist-chan!” Ibiki calls as she starts up the stairs.

Sakura shivers, leaving as Inoichi begins dressing Ibiki down about propriety and protocol as the other man laughs. Her time at the T&I unit has just gotten much more colorful.

“So, fūinjutsu?”
Karin glances up from where she has been lazing indolently on Sakura’s couch as she gripes about the Academy students and teachers. As usual, the girl flushes as she meets Sakura’s inquisitive gaze. “U-uh, what about fūinjutsu?” she asks.

“You used it in the fight against Kabuto did you not?”

Karin sighs heavily, slumping. “Yeah. For all the good it did me.” She looks down morosely. “I’m still working on that technique.”

Sakura waves her hand, eying Karin’s bright hair and again wondering about her heritage. Fūinjutsu and red hair are characteristic traits of the Uzumaki. Sakura perches on the edge of the couch, staring down at her newest friend. “Where’d you learn fūinjutsu?”

“My mom is the one who taught me the techniques before she…yeah. She learned from her mother and grandmother.” She hugs her knees tightly, frowning. “We were once part of a large clan…we even had a city of our own…but, apparently it fell long ago, before even my grandmother’s time. The clan was spread through all the nations.”

Sakura eyes her, realization a heavy burden in her stomach. “Did your mother ever name the clan you were born into?”

“Hm? Yeah, it’s the Uzumaki.”

“What?” Naruto yelps, stepping out of his room.

Sakura stifles a yelps. She hadn’t realized that Naruto is present.

Karin hikes a brow at the boy, crossing her arms as she eyes him mulishly. She looks much more guarded than she is around Sakura alone. “What’s it to you?”

“I’m a Uzumaki,” Naruto whispers, staring at Karin like she is everything he has ever hoped for but never actually expected.

Karin’s red eyes go wide as she stares at Naruto, stunned. “You…you’re…”

He nods, joining them on the couch. Sakura grins to herself as the two begin speaking rapidly, words almost unintelligible with their excitement. She exchanges a happy grin with Ashura who is smiling at his host fondly. Sasuke is off training with Shisui and Indra is with him. It’s probably for the best. Neither is great at emotional gestures or encounters.

When some of the hype has petered out, Karin returns her gaze to Sakura. “Why were you asking about fūinjutsu?”

“Oh, just…” Sakura hesitates. “I was just going to ask for tips but it isn’t the most appropriate time right now. Actually…you know, the Hokage probably has some other documents left behind by the Uzumaki. As the rightful heirs, you can probably claim them.”

“Really?” Naruto asks, eyes sparkling.

Sakura feels a pit of guilt in her gut as she curses herself for not bringing it up before. Honestly though, she just hasn’t thought about it. “Only one way to find out,” she declares, pulling herself up and ignoring the slight twinge of pain that races through her leg.
The trio stares down at the pile of scrolls that have been dropped to the floor. Sakura’s eyes are wide with surprise and hunger. She had no idea that there were so many scrolls that survived the loss of the Uzumaki clan.

“Wow,” Karin breathes, eyes alight with wonder.

“Yeah,” Sakura murmurs.

Naruto touches a scroll reverently and Sakura remembers that he has lost his entire family as has Karin. (So has Sakura, but she doesn’t like to think about that.) This is all that they have left of their family.

Suddenly feeling like she is intruding on something intimate and unobtainable for her, Sakura steps away, planning to sneak off into her room.

“Where are you going?” Karin asks, anxiety high in her voice.

“I was…I just…” Sakura says, fumbling for words.

“Stay,” Naruto says, eyes bright with unshed tears. “We’re family and I think I’ll need your help with the difficult kanji.”

Sakura nods, overwhelmed. The three teenagers take a seat and slowly, gently begin to read the history of the Uzumaki and the secrets of fūinjutsu.

Sakura sits Sasuke and Naruto down for a discussion they should have had months-years-ago.

“What’s going on, Sakura-chan?” Naruto asks, watching her with worry in his eyes.

Sasuke watches her with a similar look.

She smiles slightly to relieve their worries. She looks to Indra and Ashura for a bolster in confidence before turning back to her teammates. “Well, there’s no easy way to say this,” she says.

“Are you pregnant? Are you dying?” Naruto asks, voice rising with each word.

Sakura blanches. “What? No! Why would you even ask that?”

“Kiba’s been filling his head with weird stories,” Sasuke says, shooting Naruto a scathing glance.

“Yeah, no, nothing like that,” Sakura says hastily, trying to assuage Naruto’s fears. “It’s…a little more complicated than that.”

“More complicated than a baby?” Naruto asks, voice high.

“I see dead people!” Sakura replies before clapping a hand over her mouth with a wince. That was definitely not the way she envisioned this going but Naruto got ahead of himself. She shakes her head and sighs. “I see…er, two dead people.”

“Okay,” Sasuke says in a drawn out tone that seems like wariness.

Sakura scowls. She isn’t crazy.
Well, not for that at least, Inner Sakura replies.

Naruto exhales with relief. “Much cooler than a baby or a terminal illness! Can you Summon them? Are you a necromancer like in those books you gave me? Are they here right now?”

Sakura laughs, genuinely happy. Of course Naruto would take this into stride. “I can sort of Summon them,” she says, looking at the spirits out of the corner of her eyes. “I’m not a necromancer. They are here right now actually.”

“Are they always around?” Sasuke asks. Sakura nods. “That explains the way you’d always space out when you were a genin. I thought you were an airhead for the longest time.” Upon seeing Sakura’s thunderous scowl, Sasuke flushes. “Hey! What was I supposed to think? Besides, when I got to know you I realized you just had your own, odd idiosyncrasies.”

“Thanks,” Sakura says dryly.

“Don’t listen to Sasuke-teme! He’s the weird one,” Naruto says. “Can we talk to the ghosts? Can you hear them?”

“Well, they can hear you but if you cannot see them, I doubt you’ll be able to hear them. As for me hearing them…that’s a recent development.”

Sasuke snaps his fingers, eyes lighting with an epiphany. “That’s why you were so dead-set on learning that antiquated language! That’s how you communicated with them!”

“Yeah,” Sakura replies.

Naruto jumps to his feet, running around the room and staring wildly at every corner. “Can you hear me?” he asks in an exceedingly loud voice. Sakura is glad that she slapped a no-noise seal on the door before starting the conversation. “Hey, ghosts!”

“Tell him to shut up!” Indra says, placing his hands over his ears.

“Naruto, Indra would like you to be quiet. Also, they prefer to be referred to as ‘spirits,’” Sakura says, patting the seat next to her. Naruto bounds over to it, sitting and staring at Sakura with awe in his eyes.

“How’d you meet them?” Naruto asks. “Indra and…”

“Ashura,” Sakura supplies.

“Indra and Ashura?”

Sakura flushes, focusing her gaze on the far wall. “Ah, well…actually…they were following the two of you around.” She ignores their yelps. “Ashura was attached to Naruto and Indra to Sasuke. I first noticed them while we were in the Academy and I made sure to avoid you guys.” She smirks wryly. “Obviously, that didn’t work. When they realized I could see them, we started to communicate and…well, they’re two of my best friends in all the world.” She smiles slightly as the two spirits radiate happiness at her words.

“Why did they follow us?” Sasuke asks, looking vaguely troubled.

“You aren’t haunted,” Sakura says. “I think…maybe the two of you are the descendants of them. You guys remember the history lessons right? The Ōtsutsuki brothers? The Uchiha claim to be descended from Indra and the Senju and perhaps the Uzumaki from Ashura. I guess they just had a
natural affinity for the two of you.”

“And now they follow you around?” Naruto asks.

“Well, here’s the thing. Ashura and Indra have been anchored to the two of you probably since your birth. Recently, after the incident in Hot Water, they’ve been able to use me as an anchor.” Sakura’s expression clouds with anxiety. “Are you… are you okay with being an anchor? Neither of them would ever do anything to hurt you, a lot of times they sort of drift. I mean, they can just stay with me if you’d rather…”

“It’s fine, Sakura,” Sasuke says gruffly.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he says, ears tinged red. “Anyway, I’m sure Naruto has lots of questions so…”

“Can they interact with the physical world? How can you see them? Have you seen any other spirits? How—“

Sakura grins as Naruto babbles on and on, curiosity clear on his face and Sasuke’s as well. There was no reason to worry about their reactions; though Sakura had feared the worst. Instead, she settles back into her seat with her spirit friends and teammates surrounding her. It is freeing to let others in on the secret.

Sakura basks in their presence as she patiently answers questions and acts as the intermediary between teammate and spirit.

Ino is Sakura’s third kiss.

It happens like this:

Ino and Sakura are in Ino’s room discussing Ino’s recent decision to receive training in seduction. It will be a few years before Ino is actually put out on missions, just because of how extensive the training is. As a honeypot ninja, Ino will be able, with but a few suggestive words and sultry glances, to have a target singing their secrets. It all comes down to body language and intent and unspoken promises that will never be kept.

Ino is perfect for the job, with her generous figure, classical features, and bright eyes. She will undoubtedly be one of the best. (“Neji is receiving the same training as well,” Ino confides. “You know, for the targets who aren’t attracted to women.”)

“Wait, wait, so will you… you know?” Sakura asks, flushing slightly.

Ino snorts. “No. It’s all about intent you know? You have to use a lot of nonverbal communication to convey that you are going to hook up with your target. Thankfully, I’m not going into this for long cons where one would have to…” she trails off, blushing. “Yeah. Most of the time it will just be another avenue to get information without bloodshed. You know, you’d be good at it! You’re great at nonverbal stuff.”

Sakura has never been happier for her slight figure, large forehead, and prosthetic leg. She is uncomfortable with the idea of promising (even if the promises are empty) sexual activities to strangers. With her looks and disability, she has never been approached for the extra training.
“I doubt I would be,” Sakura says, shaking her head. “Anyway, how’s training going?”

Ino groans, flopping onto the bed. “The instructor keeps talking about kissing and the different types of kissing. It’s driving me crazy!”

Sakura honestly is a little surprised. She can think of multiple boys (Shino, Neji, Sasuke, and Kiba to name a few), who would jump at a chance to kiss Ino. She knows that Ino is aware of at least two of those crushes.

“Hey!” Ino exclaims, staring wide-eyed at Sakura. “How about we kiss?”

“What?”

“C’mon,” Ino wheedles. “You have some experience.” (Sakura would disagree. Two kisses do not count as experience.) “Please?”

Sakura leans forward, cutting off the drawn out syllable as she slants her lips over Ino’s.

It is…awkward. Their noses bump each other, their teeth clack, and Sakura really can’t figure out what to do with her tongue. At least, until Ino takes over the kiss.

She coaxes Sakura’s mouth open and slips her tongue in. Sakura’s thought process short circuits for a few, heated, moments until Ino pulls away.

Ino takes one look at Sakura’s glazed eyes before bursting into giggles. “You’re such a dork!”

Sakura laughs as well, albeit a little raggedly, and shoves Ino off the bed. “Look who’s talking, pig!”

They devolve into harmless bickering, grinning all the while. Sakura is glad that she was able to be Ino’s first kiss and share that intimacy with her and she knows Ino feels the same.

“Sakura,” a voice reproaches.

Sakura yelps, falling off her bed.

Kiki lets out a yowl of rage, batting her paws at the orange pygmy marmoset that hangs from Sakura’s light fixture. Team Seven is away on a mission and Ashura and Indra have reluctantly followed. (Sakura encourages them to pay more attention to their original hosts and they are trying.) Sakura is alone but for Kiki.

“Aki!” Sakura says, standing up. “What are you doing here?”

“Call off the beast,” Aki replies, turning reproachful eyes on the livid cat.

Sakura shrugs slightly, stooping to sweep the cat up into her lap. She babbles nonsense to the cat for a moment, burying her face in Kiki’s fur. It is a tried and true method to calm Kiki down. (Though if someone else tries it, usually Naruto, they get a face full of scratches.)

“Why are you here, Aki?” Sakura asks again, settling the cat in her arms.

Aki, now seated on Sakura’s windowsill and looking much more composed, sighs. “You’ve been avoiding us.”
Sakura averts her eyes to Kiki who stares up at her solemnly. There is no solidarity there. “Avoidance is a two-way street,” Sakura replies evasively.

Aki nods. “Hiruzen is burdened with the weight of decades of guilt. You know as well as I do that his memories haunt him.”

“They haunt me too,” Sakura says, staring at her prosthetic.

Aki catches the direction of Sakura’s gaze. “The actions committed against us are perhaps what we best remember. Still, would you rob Hiruzen of your presence?”

“What do you mean?” Sakura asks.

“I will be frank Sakura-kun; Hiruzen is not a young man. In fact, he is perhaps the oldest ninja in this business aside from Danzō and he at least has the luxury of remaining in the village. Do not allow your relationship with Hiruzen to stagnate because of the actions of his former apprentice.”

“He didn’t help me,” Sakura replies quietly, face and voice heating with anger. “He damn well knew how dangerous Orochimaru is and he just left me to him!”

“No! Sarutobi-sensei couldn’t face his former apprentice and I had to do it for him! It was a complete farce of a fight. How could I stand against someone with so much more strength?”

Sakura thinks of hurtful words yelled at friends in her darkest moments, of her formerly blind nationalism, of the naive words she threw at Tsunade-sama when they first met. She is silent.

Aki nods. “Hiruzen had no way of knowing how everything would turn out. Did he request that you take his place against Orochimaru?”

“No,” Sakura says. “That…that was me.”

Aki sighs, ruffling Sakura’s hair and moving onto her shoulders. “Sakura…your actions undoubtedly saved Hiruzen. You know as well as I do that his compassion is both his greatest strength and his greatest weakness.” Her eyes are wide as she continues, “Your love for Konoha and its inhabitants is the same.”

“Aki…” Sakura says, eyes slipping closed as Aki begins to run nimble fingers through her hair. She has missed this. “It hurts though. I…I thought Sarutobi-sensei was going to swoop in and save me.”

Aki makes a clicking noise with her tongue. “It is a hard lesson, learning that your heroes are not infallible.”

Tears rise to Sakura’s eyes, hot and heavy with guilt. She thinks of her teacher, alone and wracked with remorse. “I-I’ve been a terrible person haven’t I?”

“No,” Aki replies, brushing through Sakura’s bangs. “You needed a chance to recover. You both did. Still, I won’t allow you or Hiruzen to wallow around in misery. The two of you need to talk.”

The hairs on Sakura’s neck stand up on end as the air begins to crackle with energy.
“What are you--?”

When the world stops spinning, Sakura can clearly recognize where they are. Sprawling gardens, tenderly cared for, rise around her on all sides and as far as her eyes can see.

The Sarutobi estate.

“Aki!” Sakura says, outraged at being transported without even being asked.

The marmoset leans over Sakura’s head, staring down at her with unrepentant, purple eyes. “You’re a Sarutobi now. You belong here.”

“Sakura?” a voice says, full of something like hope and regret.

Sakura stiffens slightly and, despite the voice that screams to run away and never look back, turns.

Sarutobi-sensei stands before her, gardening hoe in one hand and a watering can in the other. He looks older than Sakura has ever seen and in every wrinkle in his face Sakura sees melancholy and wretchedness and guilt all bundled together as one. He seems smaller in plainclothes, covered in dirt and skin darkened by the sun. He stares at her bared leg with a wretched look writ clear in his entire body.

She has missed him like one misses the heat and warmth of the sun on a cloudy day.

Sakura doesn’t even think. She runs. (Aki has jumped down from her shoulders.)

His hoe and watering can can clatter to the ground as Sarutobi finds himself with an armful of apprentice. (Aki has thoughtfully removed all weaponry from her hair.) It is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins as both sob, senselessly babbling words of apologies and explanations.

They are not completely better and Sakura knows it will take more than a few words to span the months of silence that linger between them.

Still, it is a start.

It is Sakura’s sixteenth birthday and everything is different.

In the year since her last birthday, her eyes have been opened to the imperfection of Konoha, she has scars both physical and mental, one less limb, and more connections in Konoha and other nations than ever before. She has officially lost the innocence of her youth and Sakura cannot bring herself to want to change it.

Her imperfections are beautiful.

So Sakura is happy to celebrate her sixteenth birthday among all of her friends. All of the Rookies are there along with their teachers, as well as the spirits, Karin, Tsunade, Shizune, Ibiki, Kyoto, the Yamanakas (Mitsuki among them), and the Uchiha. They are at the Sarutobi estate, lounging around the gardens. Sakura devours dango, trades stories, and laughs at the shenanigans that happen around her. Sarutobi-sensei stays close, still reeling from the distance that has been between them for months. Sakura doesn’t resent his closeness and happily listens to his stories.

“Sakura!” Tenten calls.
Sakura turns, raising an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“It’s present time!” she says, grin wide and bright.

Sakura smiles, moving over to Tenten. Everyone gathers around, eager to see her reactions. “I didn’t realize there were gifts,” Sakura says.

Tenten just smiles. “Well, honestly, it’s just one gift, but it’s a really good one.”

“Okay, okay,” Sakura says, waving a hand. “Don’t worry about it Tenten. Um…where is it?”

“Here,” Ino says, carrying a large package with Ibiki.

Sakura has to laugh at the picture they make together.

Ibiki just scowls half-heartedly and ruffles her unbound hair. “You’re lucky that I like you.”

Sakura grins impishly, taking a seat and accepting the gift with thanks. She grunts with the weight of it.

“Let us know if you’d rather it be a different color,” Kyoto says, uncharacteristically nervous.

“Oh if you need a different size,” Shizune adds.

“She won’t need a different size,” Tenten says with an eye roll. “Ignore them. Go ahead and open it.”

Sakura shoots Indra and Ashura mystified looks but they just smile in a mysteriously smug way. Her eyes narrow; they know.

So, suddenly burdened with trepidation, Sakura pulls away the wrapping paper and slowly opens the box.

She stares down at the gift, unable to even really process what she is seeing.

“Sakura-chan?” Karin asks, tremor in her voice. “Are you alright?”

She hasn’t even noticed that there are tears running down her face. How embarrassing. Still, she can’t even be bothered by it as it is the most wonderful gift she has ever received. It is better even than Sashimasu.

Inside the box is a new prosthetic. It is shaped like her still whole leg, made of a shiny, heavy metal and lined with clear tubing. With shaky hands, Sakura pulls it from the box, smiling at her distorted reflection.

Kyoto steps forward, knelling in front of Sakura. “We made it based on the template of your flesh leg. Tsunade-sama, Shizune-sama, and Tenten all helped with the logistics of that; creating a composite mirror image. See this tubing? We were able to create this leg in a way that allows you to channel chakra through it. It is heavier than your current prosthetic—”

Sakura cuts Kyoto off, wrapping her arms around the woman’s neck as she tries to keep from full out sobbing. She feels so incredibly loved and cherished by these people around her.

Finally, Sakura pulls away, staring into Kyoto’s damp eyes. Many of the people present are misty-eyed but no one is impolite enough to point it out.
“Thank you,” Sakura says, voice raw and rough. “All of you. I...there’s nothing I can say that can convey the depth of my gratitude.”

“Would you like to try it on?” Sarutobi asks, voice gentle as tears run down his face.

It is the happiest that Sakura has ever seen him.

“Yes, please,” Sakura says, jumping to her feet eagerly. “I’ll be back soon!”

She races into Sarutobi’s house, familiar with the layout. Once she is in the bathroom, Sakura pauses, staring the full-length mirror. She is so different now than she was just a year ago. Her hair is unbound and she wears a flimsy tank top and shorts, exposing her prosthetic to the world. Two months ago, she wouldn’t have been willing to bear herself to the world in this way.

She’s changed. She’s grown and realized that perfection is impossible. She doesn’t have to wear her chūnin vest and hair spikes as a shield. Certainly, they are necessary items in the field, but Sakura has learned the hard way how valuable relaxation is. She has to give herself time and forgive herself her mistakes and shortcomings.

Still watching herself in the mirror, Sakura shucks her shorts, taking a seat on the edge of the bathtub and gently releases the strap holding her current prosthetic. She pulls the new one close, fitting her leg into the groove of the prosthetic. It fits perfectly and Sakura notices that there is no strap.

Slightly confused, Sakura falls into herself, staring at her chakra network. Where there was once a void, there is now a tentative, green glow.

“Inner,” she says, voice almost breaking.

“I know,” she replies, breath hitching. “I know.”

Sakura reaches forward slowly, remembering what happened last time she dared to touch the place where her leg once was. This time is different. Something snaps into place and Sakura can feel again. Certainly, it is not on the same level as her flesh and blood leg. It is more of just an ability to feel pressure. Still, considering that it was once a vast emptiness, the ability to feel is overwhelming.

“Oh,” Sakura says, returning to the waking world. “Oh.”

Tears spill once more from her eyes as she stares down at the prosthetic. The clear tubing is now alight with green energy and Sakura knows that it is chakra. Despite the fact that this prosthetic is much heavier than the last, Sakura leaps to her feet, examining herself at all angles in the mirror as giddiness wells in her chest.

“Everything alright?” Ashura asks from the other side of the door.

“Yeah,” she replies, pulling her shorts back on.

“You sure?” Indra presses.

Sakura swings the door open, staring up at the spirits’ guilty expressions. “I’m great,” she says, grin nearly hurting her face.

They smile back, basking in her joy. Together, the three of them walk back out into the party. Sakura is a little shaky on her new, heavier leg but she will adjust. Sakura is reminded of the party
that came after the INCIDENT and she almost cannot believe how much has changed since then.

She knows that she can overcome whatever is ahead. The political climate among Kiri, Kumo, and Suna is lightening even as Konoha’s relations with Iwa, Oto, and Akatsuki continue to worsen. There is war on the horizon; Sakura smells it in the air and knows it by the movement of the great tree’s roots.

Still, she is surrounded by friends and family that she has chosen.

Sakura is not worried.

She is going out in the frontlines.

Chapter End Notes

so, my headcanon for sakura in this story is that she is demisexual and panromantic. ino is bisexual. she and sakura are not in a romantic relationship. and yes, karin does have a crush on sakura. my logic is that karin fell in love with sasuke in canon because he saved her. sakura is the one who saved her in this story so…yeah.

if you or a loved one ever says, “I want to go to sleep and never wake up,” get help IMMEDIATELY. this phrase is one of the most used and seemingly benign indicators of suicidal tendencies. sorry for going all PSA but it needed to be said.

-jay
Sakura bends over the tapestry, running her fingers down the raised bumps within the pattern. She pauses, scrawling something down on a scroll, and returns to mapping out the pattern of bumps. She knows that she doubtlessly looks ridiculous, but she doesn’t mind.

After all, these bolts of cloth are the main way she receives her spy reports.

It was a plan born of her merchanting roots, the ease by which the Haruno clan moves goods to and from many of the shinobi nations. It is simple to get cloth included in Haruno orders from those nations back to Konoha.

Currently, she is reading through a report from one of her Iwa plants, an older guild member who deals in weaponry. She is situated in an alcove of Sarutobi-sensei’s abode, an area that he has cordoned off for her use.

Sakura puts down a few more letters, looking over what she has written thus far. She sucks in a breath, running her fingers over the bumps once more to verify what she wrote.

Sakura sits back heavily, vaguely aware of the way her blood rushes away from her face.

Mitsubachi has been disappeared.

Mitsubachi, the prodigal daughter of the Kamizuru clan, a proud member of the Bomb Brigade, and a silent supporter of a future where Konoha and Iwa are partners, is gone, taken by Iwa’s Granite Force. Sakura knows, from rumors and whispers while she was in Iwa, there is no chance to retrieve Mitsubachi.

She will be tortured and, upon satisfactory responses, be disposed of in a deep grave, crushed to a pulp by the weight of the earth.

(For people of Iwa, this is the worst of deaths to receive. They utilize sky burials, leaving the body above ground to feed back into the universe. From dust to dust, giving themselves back to the earth from which they emerged.)

Sakura hunches over the tapestry, closing her eyes against the sharp, jagged pain that radiates throughout her chest. She remembers Mitsubachi as she was, wild and unfettered, proud in the face of derision, and uncompromising in her standards. She taught Sakura to make a bomb from scratch. She was the first friend Sakura had in Iwagakure.

And now? She is gone, at the fault of none other than Sakura.

She finishes reading the tapestry, writing out her seed’s report on the unease within Iwa, the rising sense of nationalism in the face of the other nations. The tensions are growing and Sakura knows it will boil over sooner or later.

With that task done, Sakura draws one of her scrolls from her pack, summoning a few materials. She cannot honor Mitsubachi by her traditions; she has no way to reclaim her body. However, Sakura can offer her this meager respect.

She places a candle down in front of her, using a simple fire ninjutsu to light the candle. Sakura
stares down into the flickering flame, cutting free a hank of her hair and holding it above the flame. The fire licks up the hair, consuming it fully and filling the room with an awful stench.

“I cannot give you the dust of the earth,” Sakura says, blinking against the heat in her eyes. “I can only offer you ashes, as befits Konoha.” She laughs wetly. “You believed there could be peace among us; perhaps this may be the final bridge between you and me.”

She bows her head, shoulders shaking. “I am sorry Mitsubachi. Your death is upon my hands. You died for what you believed in; our shared goal. I will carry your memory with me always and fight to honor your sacrifice. One day, perhaps beyond my lifetime, our nations will be at peace.”

Sakura falls face first on her bed, exhausted but scrubbed freshly clean.

(She doubts she’ll ever be clean. It is impossible to wash away the blood of those she hasn’t even met, will never meet, despite being responsible for their ends.)

She groans, muffled only slightly by the pillow she lays upon.

“Sakura,” comes the uncharacteristically hesitant greeting.

Ashura.

“Are you well, Sakura?”

Indra.

She rolls over onto her back, fighting the scowl that crosses her face at the sight of the spirits.

She wants rest, peace, stillness.

(He hates having to play act, to gamble confidently with the lives of others. It is one thing to put her life on the line on the daily. It is another beast entirely to gamble away other people’s lives with one poor decision.)

“What’s wrong Sakura?” Indra asks, ghostly hand touching her shoulder.

“It’s your spy work again, isn’t it?” Ashura asks, nearly vibrating violently with intensity. His eyes are fierce. “Sarutobi is working you too hard, too fast.”

Sakura doesn’t reply, unable to meet their gazes.

“Damn it Sakura!” Ashura says, glaring down at her. “Talk to us!”

Sakura glares back, unwilling to deal with his tantrum. “Maybe I need to be alone sometimes!” She doesn’t notice the way they recoil. “You ever think of that? Maybe it gets to be a little much to share my space with two grown men that no one else can see!”

Her chest heaving, Sakura immediately regrets her outburst. She notices the pained and closed off looks in both of their expressions. She deflates, moving forward to both of them.

“I didn’t mean it,” Sakura says quietly, placing her hands in theirs. “Truly, I didn’t. I just…I am sorry. I’m just…exhausted. It’s hard to work with these people; to hold their lives in my hand as I guide them, train them. One wrong move…” She breathes shakily, remembering Mitsubachi’s
crooked grin. “Well, it’s more blood on my hands. That’s why I block you on those missions. That’s why I keep you away.” She feels the tears that burn and sting at her eyes and she brushes them away angrily. This isn’t about her. It’s about the brothers and she isn’t going to make it about her. She isn’t going to be selfish. She has to make it right. “I-I said those words in anger and it was wrong of me to do so.”

The two brothers do not hesitate to embrace her, arms folding in tightly around her.

“We’ve all done things that we regret,” Indra says, smoothing her hair out of her face. “Sakura, brave heart, you should know by now that you needn’t feel shame around us. We’ve all grown together, through rough and difficult times.”

Ashura nods, brushing the tears off her face with gentle fingers. “We’re not angry Sakura. I was…I am hurt by your words but I understand why you said them. No one can be around someone else constantly without reprieve without going mad. You need your space at times as do we.”

Sakura chuckles wetly. “I really didn’t mean to say it that way. I love having you with me most of the time. I miss you when you’re away. Your time with Sasuke and Naruto…I hope you get a chance to understand your descendants and also further your renewed friendship with each other.”

Ashura smirks, nudging Indra. “Yeah, yeah. We’re starting to get along more, try not to gloat too much.”

Indra elbows Ashura back with a smug smile, wrapping his arms more securely around Sakura. “He’s an idiot for sure, but he’s my idiot brother. Someone has to watch his back.”

“Oh!”

The three recline back on the bed and Sakura finds herself oddly reminded of sharing a bed with Karin or Team Seven, while out on missions. Somehow, this is different. There is something more familiar here, more intimate and deep. It is pleasant and it sends a feeling of tingling warmth down Sakura’s spine and through her body.

So, Sakura falls asleep with a content smile on her face, toning out the quiet, good-natured bickering of the brothers.

(Shes enjoys these quiet moments, this safe haven. With the brothers, she doesn’t have to put on a show or facade. She doesn’t have to be an expert or play a game with the lives of others. She can simply be.)

“What did you say?” Sakura asks, pausing in her efforts to polish Sashimasu. Karin and Naruto, sitting on either side of her, are still as well.

Kiba glances at her, posture completely defeated. He looks absolutely miserable and Akamaru is exactly the same, all drooping ears and slumped shoulders. “The Hyuuga are not exactly happy about Hinata being disowned without any consequences. They want to seal her Byakugan. Hiashi has fought it for the past few years but the clansmen are starting to look for ways around him.”

Sakura frowns severely, looking around at the other Rookies in the room. Everyone, aside from Hinata herself, is present. All are tense and even Shikamaru wears an uncharacteristically deep scowl.
“Neji?” Tenten asks, eyes dark.

Neji nods. “It’s true. The branch house of the family resents the fact that Hinata-sama is free to move as she pleases while they bear the shame of the seal.” He raises his arms hastily when some glance at him askance. “I am in the minority on this one.” His lips twist in a grimace. “No one deserves the burden of the seal.”

“And the main house?” Ino asks.

“They do not like the idea of a Byakugan user roaming freely outside of the Hyuuga family. I think that the Kiri nin, Ao, set off this most recent attempt to seal Hinata-sama’s Byakugan,” Neji says.

“It doesn’t help that Ao felt the need to flaunt his ill-gotten kekkei genkai to them,” Sakura adds.

“So what do you propose we do?” Sasuke asks, bristling in defense of his friend.

Kiba looks to the Uzumaki cousins, expression solemn. “I know the two of you are the resident experts on fūinjutsu. We think that the sealing is a foregone conclusion at this point. Is there any way that the seal can be modified to keep from giving the main house of the family power over Hinata?”

Naruto, Sakura, and Karin all look at each other. They have been practicing fūinjutsu since the retrieval of the Uzumaki clan’s scrolls. Some they copy directly from the scrolls and others they have…experimented with.

“There is one,” Naruto says hesitantly. “We were hoping to alter my own seal.” He lifts his shirt, showcasing the marks that hold the Kyuubi prisoner. “He’s been willing to talk but I want to give him more freedom…” Naruto trails off, thinking hard.

Karin smiles wryly, turning to her friends. “What Naruto is trying to say is that it’s possible. How much time do we have?”

“One month at the most,” Neji replies. “I think that it can be stalled for that long.”

Sakura nods, looking to Karin who grimaces. It is bound to be difficult, even with the three of them working together. Sakura turns to the rest of her friends, all of them united in this.

“We’ll need help on this one,” she says freely. “Any resources that you can offer us…Neji, we’ll need any knowledge you are free to divulge. Tenten, we’ll need your help from the medical side of things. Everyone, any input you may have on the matter, even the smallest details…” Sakura trails off. “This is going to be a lot of delicate, finicky work. Still, it’s for the best possible cause. Are you in?”

Shikamaru’s eyes are dark and alert. It is the most present Sakura has seen him outside of a life or death situation. (It is more than slightly terrifying.) He smiles, more a baring of teeth than anything and Sakura fears for the safety of the Hyuuga who have dared to place Hinata in this situation. (Everyone should be afraid of a motivated Nara.)

“We’re in.”

Sakura frowns slightly to herself, clenching her fists as she stands before Tsunade. She has a rather major request to make of the woman and she hopes that she can pull it off.
“What is it Sakura?” Tsunade asks, amused by her formality. The girl possesses some odd mannerisms and they never fail to make Tsunade smile. (She has become used to abrasive ninja like Naruto and Kiba and Ino.)

“I…have a bit of a request Tsunade-sama,” she replies. “Some information has come through the roots that may allow us to expand our network of sprouts.”

Tsunade’s eyes narrow. “Go on.”

Sakura sighs, hating herself for what she is about to say. She does not want to place any of her friends in harm’s way. “Uzumaki Karin was held captive by Otogakure for four months. During that time, she was kept close to Kabuto and Orochimaru. I believe that she possesses information that may prove vital in the planting of seeds within the shinobi of Oto.”

Tsunade hums. “Karin has already passed on all relevant information to T&I. She did so upon arrival here. What else could you possibly give us?”

“You had her give information about the weaknesses of the ninja and the infrastructure of Otogakure. From our conversations, I know that she made friends or, at the very least, acquaintances with a few of the shinobi. Some of them have cropped up in reports recently; Suigetsu, Tayuya, Kimimaro, just to name a few.”

“You believe that Karin can make contact with these ninja,” Tsunade says with the slightest of smiles. “You believe that they can be planted.”

Sakura shrugs. “Perhaps. Without a doubt, Karin is going to be the one with the best shot of convincing them. They aren’t going to respond to an enemy such as myself, but Karin…Karin was one of them, however unwilling. She knows them as more than just stats and abilities; she knows their stories. She will know the ones who can be planted.”

“It’s a long shot,” Tsunade says, staring down unseeingly at the documents on her desk. “It’s been almost a year since she was with them. People change and so do their alliances…”

“All you say is true,” Sakura replies evenly, resolute. “Still, this may be our only chance to infiltrate Oto from within.”

“Have you discussed this with Karin yet?”

Sakura shakes her head, guilt filling her expression once more. Here she is, offering her friend up on a platter to Konoha’s enemy. She also fears bringing up Karin’s trauma at Oto’s hands. They discussed it a few times and Sakura knows how much it affected her. Sakura fears what she is becoming; willing as she is to play this intricate game called war.

“I knew I needed to speak with you first about this. I fear that, if I told her first, Karin might follow through with the mission even if you rejected it. I’d rather her have as many resources available to her,” Sakura says.

Tsunade nods, a wry smile lighting up her eyes. “The Uzumaki, as a clan, are known to be rather reckless with their well-being. I’ll speak with Karin and Jiraiya on the matter. I assume you wish to be involved on this mission?”

“Please,” Sakura replies, both grateful and saddened to know that her plans will come to fruition. “I-I want to be of assistance. If possible, I would like Yamanaka Ino to accompany as well; I believe she can gain a good deal of poison knowledge from Chiyo-baasama.”
“Your connections among the other nations will be plenty of assistance. As long as Ino is available, I see nothing wrong in sending her to learn poison secrets from Chiyo,” Tsunade says. Sakura nods, bowing and heading to the door. “Sakura.”

Sakura stops, turning back to the woman behind the desk. “Yes?”

For a moment, Tsunade looks dismayed, brows furrowing slightly. For a moment, Tsunade seems to shoulder the burden of the world. Her expression smooths and she looks up at Sakura, a fire burning in her eyes. “Thank you for your service.”

Sakura bows once more, melancholy eating away at her. “I’ve learned of its cost,” she says quietly, eyes meeting Tsunade’s straight on. “The cost of serving Konohagakure.”

Tsunade sighs, closing her eyes when Sakura lets herself out of the room.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” she murmurs.

“What are you packing?” Karin asks, a grin stretching across her face.

“Well, I tend to seal everything into scrolls,” Sakura replies, glancing over at the girl lounging indolently upon her bed. “I would definitely suggest head scarfs and a thick cloak. If you don’t have one I can show you where to purchase one,” she says, smiling at the excitement that very clearly fills Karin.

“Sorry for all the questions,” Karin says, flush rising on her cheeks as she cleans her glasses. “It’s just…I haven’t left the village since arriving.”

Sakura pauses in her packing, moving to sit beside her friend. “Don’t apologize for your curiosity; kami knows I do the same. You’ve never been to Suna before.”

Karin brightens once more. “What’s it like?” she asks, flopping further back on the bed.

“It’s very different than Konoha. It’s hot but not in the same humid way it is here. It’s a dry heat and at night it gets bitterly cold. The sunrises are absolutely gorgeous.” Sakura pauses, staring over at Karin. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Karin looks up at her, wide-eyed. “What do you mean?”

“You are being asked to relive one of the hardest parts of your past. You’ll be in a very sensitive, difficult situation,” Sakura says, desperate to explain the stakes. She remembers her own exhausting fight to maneuver through the politics in multiple villages and knows that Karin will experience it on a whole new level. “I… I gave Tsunade-hime this idea. This… if something happens to you…it’s my fault.”

Karin leaps forward, hesitating only for a moment before wrapping her arms around Sakura. She ignores the blush that rises to her face at the close contact with her friend, instead focusing on comforting her. “Sakura, I made my choice. Tsunade-sama gave me a choice and I decided for myself.”

“But why?” Sakura asks, voice small.

“Because I want to help. Because I want to protect my home and my friends and my family.” Her
voice breaks on that last word but she pushes through. “Because I want to stop fearing those who
oppressed me and tried to break me. Because I am a shinobi of Konohagakure and I will do my part
to defend this nation.”

“You could die,” Sakura says, eyes watering. “I-I’m putting you in a bad situation.”

Karin glares at her fiercely. “So what if it was your idea? It’s my decision. I know the possible
costs.” She shudders. “I know. I know better than anyone here what could happen to me if I screw
up or if someone turns on me.”

“And you’ll risk it?” Sakura cannot keep herself from asking. “You’ll risk your life and your
freedom for this plan?”

“Of course,” Karin says with a bright smile. “This is my home now. I’ll do anything I can to
protect it.”

Sakura throws her arms around the girl, hugging her close. “Thank you, Karin. I’ll be with you
through most of it.”

Karin laughs; a joyful, light sound. “Well obviously I have no reason to fear. We’ll face
Orochimaru together just like last time.”

Sakura smiles, linking pinkies with her. “It’s the promise of a lifetime.”

Sakura cannot fight the grin on her face as they draw closer to Sunagakure. It has been over a year
now since she has met with Gaara in person but they have kept up a constant correspondence.

She smiles slightly to herself as she watches Karin and Ino interact with the rest of Team Seven.
Karin has never been out on a mission with them so seeing how she fits into their dynamic is
interesting. She keeps up well with their quirks, willing to call any of them out on their antics. Ino
is immediately in the thick of it, squabbling with the boys like she was born to do so.

Karin and Ino certainly handle themselves better than their Anbu escort.

Yamato-taichou has joined them upon their venture to Suna and the mission with Oto beyond. He
is a tall, rather unassuming looking man with average features and dark hair. He appears and acts
rather bland, if a bit scary when the team shenanigans get under his skin, which is quite often.

He is also one of Tsunade-hime’s top Anbu agents.

Sakura has read his mission logs, a benefit of working alongside Sarutobi-sensei. (He can be
forgetful with the scrolls available in his personal library.) Yamato-taichou is incredibly
accomplished and has a very personal vendetta against Orochimaru.

After all, he is the result of Orochimaru’s experiments.

Sakura catches the way that Yamato’s gaze trails after her speculatively at times. The way he
focuses in on her prosthetic leg. The way a furrow appears in his brow when Sakura meets his
gaze. Yamato is trying to figure her out, her angle in all of this.

She just kind of hopes that he will let it be.

Sakura jolts out of her thoughts as a strong chakra signature makes it way towards them. Sakura
exchanges wild looks with Ashura and Indra, falling into a defensive position.

“Stand down Sakura,” Kakashi says, smile evident in his voice. “Can you not tell who is coming our way or has it been too long?”

Sakura lowers her defenses, an incredulous look crossing her face. Her teammates exchange looks with various degrees of happiness as Kakashi nods.

“Gaara,” Sakura whispers mainly to herself, before taking off, leaving her team long behind her in the sand.

She ignores their exclamations of surprise, focused solely on seeing her friend. She travels across the dunes, senses focused on the chakra signature heading her way. Sakura’s eyes are upon the horizon and she cannot keep from smiling when she sees a figure traveling upon some sort of wave of sand.

“Gaara!” Sakura exclaims, moving toward him at even quicker pace.

Gaara pauses, sand wave wavering before he settles on the ground, watching her with wide green eyes.

Sakura doesn’t hesitate. She launches herself upon him, ready to wrap him in a hug that is sure to lift him off his feet.

Unfortunately, she has not accounted for Gaara’s sand barrier.

She runs into a wall of sand, bouncing off it harmlessly. She can hear Ashura and Indra scolding her, telling her to stop being reckless but Sakura does not heed their warnings.

Sakura stands outside the cocoon of sand, smiling excitedly. “Gaara,” she repeats, nearly jumping with nervous energy.

The sand barrier dissipates and Gaara stands before her. He is taller now, face less rounded and skin darkened by the harsh Suna sun. She still stands a hairsbreadth taller than he but she isn’t concerned with that at the moment.

Gaara wears an expression familiar to contrition as he tentatively opens his arms to her.

Sakura grins, stepping forward into his ever hesitant and gentle embrace. She inhales the scent of Sunagakure: succulents and sand and bitter harsh wind.

“It’s good to see you Gaara.”

“I-I’m sorry about the sand barrier; it was an unconscious response. I still trust you—”

“Don’t worry about it,” she replies, pulling away slightly to stare merrily into his eyes. She takes in the robes he wears; the office of Kazekage fitting him well. “You’ve fulfilled your dream.”

Gaara smiles softly, nearly glowing with an inner light. “Yes. And you?”

Sakura listens as her team comes pouring over the dunes, shouting words of concern and greeting. Indra and Ashura, ever her stalwart companions, stand on either side of her, watching her like hawks.

Sakura grins. “I’m getting there.”
Sakura curls up on the roof of the Kazekage Tower, seated next to Gaara. They are watching the sunrise. The fanfare of Team Seven’s arrival has passed and Sakura enjoys the quiet companionship of just sitting with her friend.

Well, friends.

Indra and Ashura are by her side, apparently still cautious about Gaara.

“How are your spirits?” Gaara asks.

“They’re doing well; a little overprotective but doing well.”

“And the voice within your head?”

Sakura frowns thoughtfully, thinking about it. “She’s been less present recently. I think she’s tired.”

Gaara glances at her oddly but nods.

“How are your ghosts?” Sakura asks, wanting to change the subject.

“Quieter,” Gaara replies. “Please pass on my thanks to Nii-san and Bee-san. Shukaku has calmed down since a lane of communication has been opened between us. He is still…sadistic but it is easier for him to vent his anger through…more acceptable outlets.”

Sakura places a supportive hand on Gaara’s shoulder, squeezing slightly. He turns to her, smiling softly and covering her hand with his own.

“It is better,” Gaara promises. “I am no longer alone. Temari and Kankuro are good advisers. Chiyo-baasama is a stern but fair counselor and guide. I have the entire village of Sunagakure at my back.” He turns to her, eyes warm. “And I have Naruto…and you.”

Indra makes an uncomfortable noise, causing Sakura to turn a quizzical look to him.

“What—?”

Her question is never completed.

“Sakura?” a voice interrupts.

She turns, catching sight of Karin standing awkwardly by the edge of the roof and playing with the hem of her shirt.

“Hey Karin,” Sakura greets happily.

Karin smiles slightly. “Hey. Sorry for intruding. It’s just getting late and I wanted to make sure you’re alright.”

Gaara lets out an almost silent sigh, standing to his feet and assisting Sakura to hers. “Your friends do you credit, Sakura. I forgot your need for sleep. You’ve been traveling for quite some time; you’re undoubtedly tired.”

Sakura almost argues but a jaw-splitting yawn interrupts her. She smiles sleepily. “You’re right. See you tomorrow.” Her eyes go sharp and alert. “Get some rest, Gaara.”
He smiles, waving lethargically. “Of course.”

Sakura grins, turning to Karin and joining her on the ledge. (She misses the way that Karin glares acerbically at Gaara.) Sakura glances to the spirits that follow her, puzzled by their dark expressions.

Sakura rubs her hands together, the friction only slightly distracting her from her rampant anxiety. She knows Karin is capable. She *knows* this.

However, waiting has never been Sakura’s strong suit. It doesn’t prevent her from worrying, not just for Karin’s physical safety but also for her mental and emotional well-being. Her time in Oto…it still taxes Karin to even speak if it. Karin’s lingering pain fills Sakura with impotent rage on her behalf.

Still, Sakura is Konoha raised and she trusts her comrades with her life. So she sits beneath an outcrop of jagged stone, staring unseeingly out at the sand dunes that shift endlessly around her. She settles into a meditative state, mind distant and drifting as she focuses in on her chakra.

“Sakura,” Ashura says, voice pained as he reaches for her.

Indra lays a hand on his arm, stopping him with a firm shake of his head. Now is not the time. Instead, the spirits settle on either side of her, keeping a silent vigil.

Sakura does not know how many hours have passed but the moon is fat and low in the sky and her skin is alarmingly cold to the touch when two figures appear on the horizon.

She leaps lightly to her feet, recognizing only one of the chakra signatures.

This isn’t part of the plan.

Heart thumping and adrenaline rising, Sakura strides out to meet them, all the while wondering wildly about Karin’s unorthodox plan. Both Karin and the stranger are fully enshrouded to protect from the bite of the sand.

“Karin,” Sakura greets cautiously, eyes trained on the unknown individual.

“Sakura,” Karin replies. “Could we get the fire going? I’m famished.”

Sakura nods, adjusting her face scarf before moving back to the dying embers where she was sitting. While wary of the stranger, Sakura knows that this is Karin’s mission and, while Sakura may have set it into motion, she’s just along for the ride. She trusts Karin’s judgment even in this despite her initial instincts. So she stokes the fire, eyes not flickering even once to the still covered figure. Sakura coaxes the flames higher before cooking the meat of the gazelle that she caught earlier in the day.

Finally, Sakura passes out the piping hot meat before settling down in front of the fire. She can feel the gratitude nearly pouring off Karin in waves. Sakura gives the stranger some food, allowing herself to look into the stranger’s eyes, the only part visible. They are a hard, jaded grey and Sakura feels an eerie sensation creep up her spine as the stare she felt since the arrival intensifies.

Karin notices, straightening and giving the stranger a glare. Sakura retreats to the relative safety of the other side of the fire, bracketed by the spirits.
The meal passes in a tense, prolonged silence, broken only by the sound of chewing and the sizzle of the fire. Sakura gleans little knowledge from the stranger’s mouth aside from two facts.

One, Oto sorely lacks in dental care.

Two, the stranger is, in fact, female.

Sakura contemplates this as the stranger greedily licks her fingers before wiping them against the rough fabric of her cloak.

“Enough,” Karin snaps. “Sakura and I have played along with your little game quite admirably but time is short and I’d prefer not to waste any more of it on your petty mind games.”

The stranger laughs, a bitter, coarse sound, and yanks back her hood and mask. Long, dark pink hair falls free of its confines. The stranger smirks. “Hello, Sakura-chan, I am Tayuya.”

Sakura inclines her head, impressed with Karin but also all the more on edge.

Karin has brought her one of Oto’s generals.

Karin gazes imploringly at Sakura. “Tayuya found me. I was looking for someone else.”

“And you didn’t immediately drag her to Orochimaru?” Sakura asks of Tayuya, hard glare tempered with curiosity.

“I appreciate strength,” Tayuya bites out. “Anyone who can escape the hellhole is alright in my books. Besides, I like Karin. I liked her fire in Oto and I see that becoming a wilting leaf surprisingly hasn’t changed that.”

“If you hate Oto so much why don’t you just leave?”

Tayuya laughs outright. “If you haven’t noticed sweetheart, Oto is everywhere. My family is dead and none of the stable Hidden Villages are going to welcome me with open arms as they did this Sensor.”

“And why is that?” Sakura asks, hearing the resignation in Tayuya’s voice.

“I’m bound to Oto,” Tayuya says. From her crossed arms, Sakura knows she will not elaborate. “In any case, I can do far more damage to Oto from the inside.”

Sakura trades askance looks with Karin who nods eagerly. She vouches for Tayuya’s loyalty to the cause. “I’ll have to place a seal on you,” Sakura says, cautioning her.

Her sprouts have to know the dangers that they risk should they be discovered. Death is the least of their worries, especially considering how creatively sadistic Kabuto and Orochimaru can be.

Tayuya shrugs. “Kabuto performs thorough medical examinations every six weeks or so. You’ll need to find a place he won’t notice it.”

“Why even risk it?” Sakura asks, incredulous. “You owe no loyalty to Konoha or me or even Karin. It is likely that you will be found out and tortured for your role in this. Why risk your life for a legion of faceless strangers?”

Tayuya’s lips twist and Sakura can almost taste her visceral pain. “I cannot escape Otogakure or Orochimaru’s influence. I’m fine with setting myself on fire if it means Otogakure burns too. I’ll gladly leap upon that pyre.”
Sakura takes in Tayuya’s resolute stance, her steel eyes, and tensed shoulders. She will not back down from this. Sakura sighs, waving Karin over and begins to explain, “We’re going to place a segmented seal between your toes…”

Sakura takes first watch, observing Tayuya’s long trek back to one of Oto’s hidden bases among the dunes. Her mind is less burdened with finding a spy but Sakura cannot help but feel that she has sentenced Tayuya to death. Her heart is heavy with yet another life placed on her conscience.

Sakura sighs, scrubbing a hand over her face.

She feels more than sees Indra and Ashura as they settle next to her. Fleetingly, Sakura wishes they were warm so that she can steal some of their body heat on this frigidly cold night. Sakura brushes off the passing whimsy as Tayuya finally disappears from sight.

“Have you ever condemned someone to death?” she asks softly. “Not by killing them yourself but…following your orders…”

“Yes,” Ashura replies without hesitation. Sakura turns her gaze to him, reading the guilt writ clear upon his face. “Our father shared chakra with the world. He wanted to inspire peace. Unfortunately, it didn’t happen the way he imagined.

“The clans fell to war and our father despaired. Our mother was more willing to step up and lead the clan during that turbulent time. The world was in shambles and it was our duty as the harbingers of destruction to offer protection to civilians. Some of my decisions as a leader resulted in death.”

Sakura places a hand on his arm, rubbing gently. He looks up, smiling gratefully at her. “And you?” she asks Indra.

He flushes a dull, ruddy color. “I isolated myself. I refused to aid my kin in their time of need. I didn’t lead people to their deaths but my inactivity may well have.”

Sakura curls her arms under her knees, squeezing tight. “I hate being in charge of someone else’s well-being. Life is so fragile.”

Sakura feels the phantom weights of two arms twining around her waist.

“Such responsibility is the price of greatness in this particular profession. Proficiency is a heavy burden to bear,” Ashura murmurs.

Sakura shivers, turning her gaze up to the sky. “The constellations are different here. It’s one thing I noticed during my travels. You see the Western Star? It’s always there.”

Recognizing the change of subject for what it is, Indra stretches out his free arm, pointing out the unique stars and telling Sakura the old lore surrounding the creatures of the heavens.

Sakura glances over at Karin, more than slightly concerned. She has been quiet all morning and her fingers thoughtlessly trace over the bites that cover the skin of her arms.
Sakura fears the worst.

Still they travel on in silence, making their way back to Suna.

That is, until Sakura cannot take it anymore.

“How are you?” Sakura asks.

Karin visibly starts, stride faltering for a moment. “What?”

“How are you?” Sakura repeats.

“Why do you ask?”

Sakura stops fully, giving her a look.

Karin scowls. “This mission just brought a lot back,” she snaps defensively. “I thought I was past it but…”

“There’s no date where your pain is suddenly invalidated,” Sakura says, repeating the words she has been told over and over by her therapist and by the image in her mirror. “Sometimes it crops up at the oddest of times. Believe me, I know. You were forced to face one of the worst parts of your life once more. Of course you’re having a rough time.”

Karin nods, releasing a shuddering breath. “It’s just… I thought I was stronger…that this stuff didn’t bother me anymore. Tracking down Tayuya; being tracked down by Tayuya… I kept thinking I was going to come across Kabuto or even Orochimaru. Even though I know I can Sense them long before they can catch me… even though I have so many new skills… even now, they terrify me.”

“They scare me too,” Sakura says. “Sometimes I freeze at the very thought of them.”

“Yeah. Then I found Tayuya and I remembered all the torture Orochimaru and Kabuto put me through; the experiments, the induced stress, the way we all competed to avoid further pain,” Karin looks into Sakura’s eyes, desperate to get her point across. “I did things, Sakura. Things I regret, all in the name of personal survival.”

“Karin, you said it yourself, you were trying to survive. I’ve done worse for much less. We’re ninja; very little of what we do can be considered ethical, at least by normal standards.”

“I was reminded that the only reason I am not shackled like Tayuya is because of my chakra. It rejected treatment, not for the lack of Kabuto’s trying.”

Sakura’s eyes light with understanding. “Is that where the bite marks are from?”

“Most,” Karin says. “Orochimaru liked to send me out with certain Oto nin to boost their chakra. Most… were not gentle. Some are from my time in Kusa.” Karin smiles slyly. “None from Konoha.”

“You’ll never have to use your ability against your will in Konohagakure,” Sakura vows.

Karin’s smile grows, soft and radiating from within. Sakura returns it and the two set off again, as a formerly festering wound, once jagged and sharp begins to mend.
They arrive to a Suna in chaos.

There is a strange numbness that spreads through Sakura as the news breaks. Gaara is gone. Team Seven is in pursuit. Kankuro is dying. And it is all Akatsuki’s fault.

Sakura grimly makes her way into the hospital, nodding as Ino meets her there, eyes glittering. There’s a mix of anxiety and excitement warring in Ino’s gaze, though Sakura understands it. Now is the time for them to put all their skills to the test.

Sakura looks over Kankuro, flipping through his charts absently. He seems very small, laying still, pale, and wan in the hospital bed. Sakura examines the entry wounds, small punctures that blossom purple and green and red.

“Can you help him?” Temari asks hoarsely, eyes rimmed red and hands chafed from constant wringing. “Please.” Her voice breaks. “He…Gaara…”

Sakura remembers her Academy days, huddled with Ino in the Yamanaka garden, creating an array of poisons. She smiles.

Sakura places a firm but comforting hand on her shoulder. “We can. Karin, would you take Temari out for lunch? I doubt she’s eaten in light of recent events.” She holds up a hand to prevent their protests. “Temari, you are Kazekage in Gaara’s absence. You need to take care of yourself and head to the Kazekage Tower. You are the voice of reason in this time. I know it is hard, but you must trust Team Seven.” Her lips quirk in a slight smile. “We haven’t steered you wrong yet.”

Karin takes a reluctant Temari from the room, speaking quiet words of comfort to the older woman.

Sakura waits a few moments before snapping to attention. “Bring me water and towels,” she says, speaking to the medics who are clearly out of their depth. Thankfully poison has been something Sakura’s dabbled in since youth. “Ino, you’re already scrubbed in. Have you assessed any of the poison’s components?”

Ino nods, hands hovering above Kankuro’s chest as they glow with a soft blue light. “It’s a fast acting poison aimed at destroying the lining of the organs. We’ve constructed something similar before, back after the chūnin Exams.” Her brow furrows for a moment as she investigates. “There’s an odd signature here: there’s scorpion venom in here despite a lack of need for it.”

As Ino speaks, Sakura scrubs down, accepting the tools from the wide-eyed medics as they rush into the room. She places the towel between Kankuro’s teeth. “Restraints?” Sakura asks.

One of the mousier medics runs forward and loops the thick, chakra-dampening restraints around Kankuro’s legs, arms, and neck. The restraints do not fully inhibit chakra, only dampen its strength.

“When would you like to do the honors?” Sakura asks.

“Keep his body stable,” Ino says. “In removing the poison it is possible that the passage out of the body will damage Kankuro’s chakra coils.”

Sakura positions herself at Kankuro’s head, pressing her chakra-covered hands against his temples. Ino coats her hands with chakra and water, gritting her teeth before pressing them against Kankuro’s chest. For a moment, nothing happens.

Then Kankuro screams.
It is a horrible, primal thing forced out around the towel. It barely distorts the sound. He writhes, eyes rolling wildly as Ino pushes into his bloodstream. She ignores his cries and the resounding thump of one of the medics fainting. Ino is immersed in her technique, knowing one wrong move will result in Kankuro’s death or, at the very least, becoming fully paralyzed. Sakura monitors his chakra, the way it fluctuates with panic and she presses her chakra along his, riding it out with him.

Even with her attention on the technique, Sakura registers the new presence in the room.

“Your grandson is responsible for this calamity. He’s not all that subtle; scorpion venom? It’s a bit unoriginal,” Sakura says, not even looking at Chiyo.

The woman exhales sharply in surprise. Sakura almost smirks; being apprenticed to the Professor has its perks.

“Yes,” Chiyo says blandly, fighting her initial response.

“I’m going to kill him,” Sakura says.

There is no room for opinion in her voice, only fact.

Chiyo makes a noise of protest. “Please, there must be another way.”

“The moment he targeted Gaara, he chose death,” Sakura says.

There is silence for a few moments, but for Kankuro’s screams and the sickening sound of water sloshing through his chest.

“…Let me accompany you,” Chiyo pleads. “I know my grandson’s techniques. I trained him just as I trained Kankuro. I can provide information that will be vital to your fight.”

“Fine.”

Sakura knows that Chiyo hopes to redeem Sasori. Sakura will stay true to her initial assessment. There will be no mercy, no quarter, no chances provided to him.

Sasori is dead.

And Sakura will be the one to end it.

Sakura glares through her bangs, twisting her body to avoid the poisoned spikes. Sasori’s abilities are…vexing at best.

She flexes, breaking free of the confines and flipping back toward Chiyo, glad that the woman is at her back and on her side. They have been darting around, destroying (on Sakura’s part) and evading (with the help of Chiyo’s chakra strings) all that Sasori has thrown their way. The puppet of the Sandaime Kazekage is demolished.

“It’s been a while since I did this myself,” Sasori says, slowly shucking his Akatsuki robe. “Still…”

Sakura’s eyes go wide and quickly narrow with consideration. It explains a lot though the jutsu involved…
“Now I see,” Chiyo says in a rasping voice. “The reason he looks exactly the same as the day he left…age does not affect him. The reason is staring us in the face.”

Sakura watches in fascination and slight revulsion as his body contorts in ways unimagined. She eyes the spool of thick wire where his intestines once were. Clever…

“Oh yes, it has been a while since I have had to use myself.” Sasori says, extending the rows of blades upon his back.

“He’s actually…a human puppet,” Sakura murmurs, almost to herself.

This, well, it changes things. She has been trained in the art of killing a human being but how does one destroy a living puppet? She glances at the shattered remains of the Sandaime Kazekage before cracking her knuckles.

Well, that’s one way.

“Sakura!” Chiyo exclaims and the two roll away from the flames that Sasori shoots from his hands.

Sakura bites back a curse, ripping away the fabric of her lower pants’ leg. Of course it would catch aflame. Still, it’s above her prosthetic and she really is not all too worried. She glances over to Chiyo, tucked away behind a rock to combat the heat of the fire. They need to reunite and fast. She feels the licking bellow of the flames but they never touch her as she lands beside Chiyo.

“What’s the plan?” Sakura asks.

“He is a puppet now. Our approach must change. The fact that he chose to use himself as a weapon shows that we have him off-balance,” Chiyo says.

“There has to be something that keeps his life force tied to the puppet body,” Sakura mumbles.

“The container,” Chiyo says. “Where his heart should be. That is what keeps him connected to the puppet.”

“So we remove the heart container…”

“Sasori will be defeated.”

“We have ninety seconds before the antidote…”

“I know.”

“Quit playing around!” Sasori demands, flame suddenly stopping.

Sakura breathes the slightest of sighs in relief.

Mistake.

She flips out of the way as deadly water comes shooting toward her with threatening accuracy.

“What’s this?” Sasori asks. He sounds absolutely delighted. “Girl, what’s that with your leg?”

Sakura doesn’t reply, focusing instead on dodging his constant barrage. She doesn’t have a lot of time left…

“You know, it’s very rude not to respond,” Sasori says.
“Sakura!” Indra shouts.

“Look out!”

Time’s up.

The quick call gives Sakura the briefest of chances to avoid the deadly sharp wire that hurtles toward her. She turns slightly, allowing it to deflect harmlessly off her prosthetic.

Still, she isn’t one to waste an opportunity when it is so neatly given to her.

Wrapping gloved hands around the wire, she pulls, digging in her feet and flooding chakra through her system. Sasori’s body windmills to her so she turns, positioning herself perfectly. Her punch lands squarely in his gut and the heart container flies free, the rest of Sasori’s pieces quickly falling apart as well.

Sakura turns to Chiyo and her spirits with a smile on her face. It’s over.

They’ve won.

“Did you truly think this would be so simple?” Sasori asks.

Sakura turns with horror, jumping back closer to Chiyo. He is reassembling.

Chiyo summons ten puppets, staring her grandson down. “I hoped it wouldn’t come to this,” she says sadly.

“Ten puppets…impressive,” Sasori says. “The lore states that you took down a fortress by yourself with those very puppets.”

“Yes,” Chiyo replies wearily. “And now I will do the same with you.”

Sasori begins to chuckle and Sakura is immediately on edge. “It has been quite some time since I last used that technique…” He trails off momentarily, smiling angelically as he pulls a scroll from his back and opens the compartment in his chest. (Sakura finds it enormously unfair that he can look so…beautiful for lack of a better word.) “Well. I suppose it is time. You know, you should feel honored. The last time I used this technique it was to destroy a nation. Red Secret Technique: Performance of a Hundred Puppets.”

Sakura watches, stricken as a multitude of puppets rise from the scroll. Chakra strings from Sasori’s chest attach to the puppets. She exchanges a quick glance with Chiyo, resigned as she takes in Chiyo’s crestfallen look.

Well, she’s been in worse scrapes. (Very, very few, but…)

Sakura summon her naginata from a scroll, flaring her chakra and funneling it into the blade. Her eyes narrow as she stares up at the puppets.

“Let’s go, Chiyo,” Sakura says before adding in a whisper, “Sting, Sashimasu.”

Ashura watches in awe as Sakura moves through the mass of puppets, twisting and turning lithely. While fear for her is, as always, prevalent in his mind, he cannot help but compare her movements to a dance. A dance of death and destruction as she razes the puppets into the ground.
She is glorious, covered in ash, soot, and sweat. He is reminded of some long-forgotten goddess, cruel and merciless in her reign. After all, what cares do goddesses have for the wants and morals of mortals.

Ashura cannot assist her now.

(He’s already tried.)

Still, he moves with her, slightly behind her and out of her peripherals to keep from distracting her. Indra moves in tandem and Ashura reads the frustration in his brother’s expression.

(Ashura is so glad that he can even read his brother now, remembering a time when Indra never expressed himself. He knows that he has Sakura and the softening of time to thank for this.)

Ashura doesn’t understand the rules of being a spirit. Sometimes he can interact with the material world, other times…

Well, at least he can watch Sakura in her element.

“Chiyo!” Sakura exclaims, voice nearly cracking with desperation.

She runs, regardless of the dangers of what she is about to do and throws herself in front of the blade that Sasori has raised to attack the older woman. Sakura turns slightly, bringing her prosthetic down hard on the poisoned blade.

It breaks under the strain of her chakra.

Sakura has a moment of satisfaction to stare into Sasori’s surprised, fawn eyes. Time halts for a moment…

Only to start again as Sasori is run through by two swords held by the puppets of his parents. Sakura glances out of the corner of her eyes at Chiyo who stares her grandson down grimly.

Sasori chuckles weakly, staring down at her leg, the beginning of his downfall. “What a crude device you wear for a leg, little girl,” Sasori says. “It is obvious that you wear a prosthetic. Why didn’t you have someone in Sunagakure make a better one for you? Your body is…blemished. Imperfect,” he says, cocking his head as he surveys the dark metal of her leg.

“Surprisingly I do not want to look ‘unblemished,’” Sakura replies calmly, wondering why this is the conversation he wishes to have in his last moments. “This is my body and this leg is a part of me. I’m glad it looks different. It reminds me of who I am and where I’ve come from.” She smirks. “Besides, this ‘crude device’ prevented you from poisoning me.”

Sasori shakes his head slowly, lips curling into an odd smile. “Perfection in imperfection, huh? How strange.”

“Your former partner, Orochimaru,” Sakura begins. “Is there anything you can tell me about him?”

Sasori grins. “Well, you did defeat me, little girl. I suppose I can grant you this. Kabuto of the Akatsuki is working with Orochimaru. They will meet in ten days’ time at noon on Tenchi Bridge. I planned to investigate it myself but…”

Sakura nods firmly. “Thank you.”
“Obaasan,” Sasori says, looking at Chiyo. “I’ll be going now. Little girl…I’ll meet you in my next life.”

And Sasori breathes his last.

“He could have avoided my last attack,” Chiyo murmurs. “For whatever reason…he did not.”

Sakura frowns, staring down at her fallen foe. In the end…she respected him. She steps up beside his fallen body, frowning as she notices the single ring on his left thumb. It is a dark purple, with the word “jewel” written on it in kanji. Sakura, knowing that the ring is a symbol of Akatsuki membership, removes the ring and pockets it.

Shaking her head, Sakura turns away, facing her spirits with a complicated smile. “Immortality…it seems a heavy burden.”

Indra stares at her with fathomless eyes even as Ashura nods.

The first thing Sakura sees is Gaara’s limp, lifeless body.

The second? Naruto is crying unabashedly as is Sasuke, though he is turned away from the rest.

Sakura doesn’t really see anything after that as her own eyes blur with heavy tears. She falls to her knees at Gaara’s side knowing already that it is too late.

There is nothing she can do.

“Sakura-chan,” Naruto begins pleadingly and Sakura’s heart breaks once more for her brother in all but blood. “Sakura-chan, please.”

For a moment, she hates him for this burden that he places at her feet, as if she doesn’t know that all of her training, all of her knowledge, all of her skills are worthless in the face of this moment.

After all, no one can raise the dead.

The boiling anger and rage dampen quickly and quietly into misery. Slowly, she shakes her head, mourning her friend’s loss.

“He’s gone, Naruto,” she says around the despair that closes her throat. “Gaara’s…” she cuts off, unable to continue.

“This is your fault!” Naruto screams, looking to Chiyo. “You sealed the Ichibi within Gaara. You made him believe he was a monster and Akatsuki pursued him. If he didn’t have Shukaku within him, none of this would have happened! You…you!”

“Naruto!” Kakashi says firmly, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Now is not the time to be laying blame!”

“Shove over,” Chiyo says gruffly,shouldering Sakura slightly.

“I—what?” Sakura asks, stumbling out of the woman’s way.

Chiyo looks to her, gaze solemn and Sakura is struck dumb. For but a moment, Chiyo seems ageless and ancient in a way not even Ashura or Indra are.
“There is a technique,” Chiyo intones, eyes solely on Sakura. “A forbidden technique. A life for a life. Blood for blood. I am the last to know this technique.”

“Chiyo—” Sakura breathes.

Chiyo holds up her hand. “I have lived my life and made my mistakes. My child and my grandchild are dead now. The only one to outlive me is my brother.” Her brown eyes pierce Sakura and keep her still. “Do you understand? I have very little left in the world.” She turns back to Gaara. “I helped bring this child into the world to be a weapon. It was folly on my part. Still, this child now shines as the future of Sunagakure. I will give him back his life and perhaps receive recompense for my actions.”

So saying, Chiyo lays her hands against Gaara’s chest.

“Watch closely Sakura,” Chiyo says quietly, barely a whisper above the hum of her chakra. “I impart my legacy unto you.”

“Sakura—!” Indra says, alarmed.

“Don’t even think about it!” Ashura yells, voice wild.

Sakura ignores them, eyes intent on Chiyo and her actions. She memorizes the technique and commits it to heart. She will be strong enough to protect her future, her friends, her halcyon days.

It is, after all, her nindo.

“I…I do not have enough chakra,” Chiyo admits, brows furrowed in a grimace.

Sakura lays her hands over Chiyo’s, soon joined by Naruto, Ino, Karin, Sai, and Sasuke.

“Is this enough?” Naruto asks. “Kaka-sensei will join us if we need more!”

Chiyo smiles slightly, peace radiating from her after overcoming her initial surprise. “This is more than enough. I leave this next generation in your capable hands.”

Gaara wakes to a clear, sunny sky.

He sits up, clutching his head and feeling rather empty inside.

“I…did not expect to live,” he says quietly before he is wrapped up in the embrace of pure sunlight and joy. Naruto.

“G-Gaara!” Naruto bawls, tears still pouring down his face.

Gaara tentatively raises a hand and pats Naruto’s shaking shoulder, eyes wandering over the crowd that surges all around him. He sees the other members of Team Seven milling about, Naruto’s cousin speaking in low tones with his sister, his brother looking wan but pleased, and many of the denizens of Suna.

“That’s Sakura?” he asks, trying to keep the alarm out of his voice.

Naruto pulls away, rubbing his face into his sleeve. “She’s over there,” he says hoarsely, pointing to three figures who are far off from the crowd. Sakura appears to be carrying someone. “She’s
with Chiyo-obaasan’s brother.”

“Why—?”

Gaara is interrupted by the enthused greetings of “Gaara-sama!” and “He’s alive!”

With one regretful glance toward Sakura, he turns to his people with the slightest of smiles.

“I’m back.”

Sakura scratches her cheek idly, embarrassment at the forefront of her mind. She is just serving her country and her friends. She can do without all the fanfare.

Still, she wears the formal wear and rubs elbows with the overly thankful dignitaries of Sunagakure. Sakura does enjoy the formal wear that Temari pushed on her, the artful draping of purple fabric and folds in which to hide myriad weapons. She does so with pleasure as Kakashi has strictly forbidden her from any dangerous instruments hidden in her hair. (That doesn’t stop Sasuke from passing her a lovely ornament with a sharp needle hidden within. He’s so thoughtful when he chooses to be. In fact, he gives the best gifts of anyone in Team Seven)

“Ebizō-sama,” Sakura greets, inclining her head and trying to hide her unease. He has been sticking close to her since his sister’s passing and it makes her uncomfortable. She has already explained the situation to him and thought the matter settled. Still his eyes follow her with a surprising amount of undue curiosity and it puts Sakura on edge.

(He knows well how central he is to Sunagakure, pulling strings behind the scenes. Sakura has learned the consequences of drawing attention from high places.)

“Haruno-san,” he replies, bowing slightly to her before turning to survey the room. “How are you enjoying your time in Sunagakure?”

Sakura cannot contain a snort of disbelief. “Well, my time within Sunagakure has been beyond pleasant. The people here have been incredibly kind. Especially…” Sakura pauses for a moment before clearing her throat. “Especially after.”

“That is only to be expected,” Ebizo replies. “You managed to save the beloved Kazekage as well as take down one of the fearsome Akatsuki members.” His brown eyes, so similar to Chiyo’s, bear into Sakura with a weight that she cannot ignore. “You are the first to strike down one of the Akatsuki. Many have thought them invulnerable, untouchable. What you did—what Chiyo did—it will have consequences both good and bad. I am sure that you have painted a target upon your back.”

Sakura nods. “I know. I knew it from the moment that Sasori fell. I did not go into that fight expecting such a positive outcome.”

He eyes her for a long moment. “Haruno-san, have you considered—”

“Sakura-san!” a voice booms.

The duo turns, startled as one of the legendary Sannin bumbles his way over to them. Sakura hears the slightest of sighs from her companion but she ignores it.
“Jiraiya-sama,” she says, cocking her head slightly. “I did not know you had arrived in Sunagakure. Have you informed Naruto of your arrival?”

Jiraiya laughs, swinging an arm around her shoulder as if they are close friends and, with a faux apologetic look toward Ebizō, leads her away.

“Jiraiya-sama,” Sakura says warningly, wise to his antics.

Jiraiya laughs and steers her to one of the open balconies that looks out over the desert. The night is rapidly closing in and Jiraiya casts a no-noise jutsu. “Sorry to bother you girlie, but I am actually here on official business. Besides, that old vulture was planning on trying to swipe you for Sunagakure. Valuable asset and all of that.”

Sakura straightens, glancing around. She chooses to ignore that last comment of his as it seems an unfair jab at an elderly man mourning the last of his family. “Why didn’t you say so? What did Sarutobi-sensei say?”

He scratches the back of his neck, in a way so reminiscent of Naruto and Karin that Sakura cannot help her grin. “Ah, that is to say…”

“You don’t remember do you?”

“No exactly at least,” he replies. “Still I got the gist of it. Was your mission with Karin-san successful?”

Sakura nods. “We made contact with someone within Sound’s ranks. Karin hopes to make contact with another. She knows their usual haunts so contact is possible. With all of the hubbub of…well, the Kazekage retrieval, our plans have been a bit derailed.”

“Don’t worry, Tsunade and Hiruzen-sensei aren’t angry or anything. The circumstances were regrettable and completely understandable. The Hokage is quite pleased with your victory over the Akatsuki member, Sasori no Akasuna.” He grins.

Sakura huffs slightly. “It wasn’t just me. Chiyo-sama was there as well. Without her…well, it wouldn’t have ended the way it did.” Sakura thinks back to Sasori’s last moments with a frown.

Jiraiya claps a hearty hand on her shoulder. “As the only surviving member of the battle, the brunt of the glory falls on you, kid.” Sakura winces and Jiraiya laughs. “You really don’t like the recognition do you?”

Sakura fidgets. “It goes against everything that makes us ninja.”

“Perhaps,” Jiraiya says musingly. “Unfortunately that’s the price that must be paid. Our business as ninja has become commercialized. We do not serve one master. We are, for all intents and purposes, swords for hire. Hell, that’s why each nation invented its own Bingo Book!”

Sakura groans. “My rising infamy is not what is important right now.”

“You’re right,” Jiraiya replies solemnly, jovial nature all but hidden away now. “Team Seven is heading back to Konohagakure soon.”

“How soon?”

“Just a few days. They’ll be traveling with me,” Jiraiya says. “Tsunade-hime has need of Kakashi’s repertoire of skills and the rest of the team is along for the ride.”
“And me?” Sakura asks.

“You, Karin, Ino, and Yamato will remain on your initial mission. I believe that the Kazekage may ask you to stay for a few weeks to monitor his and his brother’s health. While that is happening, Karin can spend her time honing her Senses on the other possible informant. Ino is to look into the poison techniques of the Puppet Brigade. With the chaos caused by Chiyō’s death…well, it offers a perfect opportunity for Ino. Once you’ve gotten that done, Tsunade-hime would have you return to Konoha.”

“This Yamato, he can be trusted to keep from acting rashly?” Sakura asks. “Considering his history with Orochimaru…”

“Have faith,” Jiraiya says with a disappointed cluck. “After all, the same could be said of you or of Karin.”

Sakura hums, gazing off into the distance. The sun has long since set and the skies are brilliantly clear. It is also bitterly cold. She is reminded of her last encounter with Orochimaru and she feels a primitive need to gouge out those poison yellow eyes.

“Did you seal the informant?” Jiraiya asks, rousing Sakura from her dark musings.

“Yes, we used a seal between the toes so that they will not get caught out in the act. Kabuto apparently enjoys giving check-ups.”

Jiraiya shudders. “And where’d you place your corresponding seal?”

“Both Karin and I placed one in the same location,” she replies. “Thought it best to keep with the original template.”

Jiraiya grins. “You seem to be expanding your spy network quite nicely. Soon enough, there won’t be any skin left to seal. You’ll need a scroll.”

Sakura laughs. “I’m no spymaster, Jiraiya. Certainly not of your caliber. This is just preventive action and Karin and I were best suited for the task. I won’t be taking your job any time soon.”

So saying, Sakura steps outside of their jutsu, sauntering over to the Sand siblings and her teammates. All the while she is ignorant of the calculating look Jiraiya levels her with.

(Indra and Ashura are not.)

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“Please, be cool about this,” Sakura begs, turning a glare to Yamato. “I need to go off alone.”

He folds his arms, staring her down. Karin is off seeking another potential seed, Ino is wheedling her way into the Puppet Brigade’s good graces (quite easily, considering the fact that she saved Kankuro’s life), and Sakura has something she needs to do.

“Please,” Sakura wheedles. “Jiraiya-sama has given me clearance to do this.” Technically not a lie, he did want her to expand her network…

Yamato stares her down, using his “scary face.” It is very effective on Naruto but Sakura has been exposed to Indra for years. She is immune.

Finally, Yamato sighs, deflating. “How long will it take?”
Sakura hums, thinking on it. “A day and a half at most. I’ll leave tonight.”

He stares down at her thoughtfully. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Sakura shrugs, ignoring the nervousness that pools in her stomach. “As much as anyone can know.”

Sakura ducks into the tiny, out of the way teashop, inhaling the spicy sweet scent of tea. She exhales heavily, gazing around at the patrons of the small shop.

One sticks out like a sore thumb.

With a curious sense of déjà vu, Sakura makes her way over to Hoshigaki Kisame who grins wildly at her entrance.

“Good to see you, pinkie,” he greets. “You’ve grown a bit taller.”

“You haven’t changed a bit, my shark friend,” she returns, falling into the seat across from him.

They place their orders and Kisame looks her over. “Imagine my surprise when a sloth bear appears out of nowhere during one of my solo missions and requests a meeting between the two of us.”

Sakura smiles guiltily. “It was the best way for me to contact you at the time. Sorry if it startled you.”

Hoshigaki surveys her with lidded eyes. “No, just a bit surprised that there is a Bear Summoning contract in existence. You didn’t create it did you?”

Sakura’s eyes drift to Ashura before her lips curl slightly. “No, I did not.”

“And to be called by you right after you caught Akatsuki’s attention.” He places his massive, braced arms on the table, staring down at her threateningly. Sakura is overwhelmed by the chakra he washes over her. It is like facing an ocean at storm in a tiny skimmer. “You aren’t here to assassinate me are you?”

Sakura ignores the squawks of outrage from the brother spirits, instead staring up at Hoshigaki calmly. “I fought Sasori no Akasuna because he abducted one of my dear friends. He attempted to kidnap another of my friends in the past. I have no quarrel with you.”

Hoshigaki smirks, pressure lessening. “Alright, alright. I understand. Know this though: should we meet on opposing sides upon the battlefield, there will be no quarter for you.”

Sakura nods, taking an even sip of her green tea. “I hope we will stand on the same side. Sasori gave me some interesting information before his death. Your partner will be meeting with Orochimaru in two days’ time upon the Tenchi Bridge at noon. I believe you will receive all of the necessary answers about your partner’s loyalty then.”

Kisame’s smile fades. “Why are you telling me this? I am not your ally nor am I a friend. What do you hope to gain from passing on such information?”

“There is a selfish motive, I’ll admit,” Sakura says. “I have heard stories of you in Kirigakure and I know that you are a good ninja and an even better man. You know, probably better than I, that the
climate of Kirigakure has changed in the favor of those who rebelled against the regime of the Bloody Mist. I think you would be better suited among your kin than among the freelancing vagabonds you currently accompany. Kabuto’s actions…perhaps they will convince you.”

“And then I would be your ally,” Kisame says, understanding lighting his face.

Sakura laughs. “I told you it was for selfish reasons. I do not want to fight you.” Her eyes light up. “I’d love to spar though. Sashimasu—”

“You named it that?” Kisame interrupts, grin wide and flattered.

“Yes. It was a fitting name for the naginata,” Sakura replies.

Kisame nods. “I will go to Tenchi Bridge and see what it is that finds me there.” He stands, hesitating. “I cannot promise a response you’ll like…”

Sakura shakes her head. “That’s fine. I only hope you’ll find the truth.”

She stands as well, putting her right hand out in a fist before drawing it to her chest. Kisame snorts, reaching out with a large hand and shaking hers.

“Good luck, Haruno.”

Sakura watches him leave, knowing that this is a long shot. Still, with someone like Hoshigaki on their side…well, even Orochimaru would think twice.

“It’s good to see you on your feet once more,” Sakura says as Kankuro walks into the private room, taking a seat at the table.

“Well the medic finally allowed me out of bed,” Kankuro replies, looking at Ino.

There’s an uncharacteristically soft smile at his lips and Sakura hides a smirk, knowing that he’s fallen victim beneath Ino’s beguiling ways. Her training has definitely paid off.

“You’ve been up and running about for a few weeks now,” Temari says dryly, catching the way her brother regards Ino. “The real reason you haven’t seen him, Sakura-san, is because he’s been holed up in his studio, trying to reverse engineer Sasori’s poison.”

Sakura chuckles along with the others as Temari and Kankuro fall to sibling bickering, helping herself to more salted gizzard. It is nice to relax and make merry among friends like this, seated in a secluded section of the Sand siblings favorite restaurant and trying out all of the culinary delicacies that Suna boasts. Sakura fairs much better than Ino or Karin, used now to the heavy use of spice and salt in Suna’s fare, as well as the refreshing coolness of the herbal yogurt that pairs with nearly all Suna dishes.

“How are you enjoying the greenhouses, Yamanaka-san?” Gaara asks.

Sakura smiles around her mouthful of gizzard, glad to see him initiating conversation.

“They’re quite fantastic,” Ino replies. “Chiyo-sama created an impressive collection for herself. Her meticulous and extensive gathering of plants is a commendation to Suna.”

Gaara inclines his head at that. “Thank you for your kind words, Yamanaka-san. Sakura has
informed me of your interest in poisons; please, gather clippings from any of the plants in Chiyo-baasama’s greenhouses.” His gaze goes to Kankuro, still arguing with Temari. “You have more than earned them.”

“Really?” Ino asks, smoothing the guilt from her expression. Sakura knows she’s been gathering clippings on the sly on both Tsunade-sama’s and her own behalf. “That is quite generous Kazekage-sama.”

“Think nothing of it,” Gaara says. “Consider it a gesture of the bond between Sunagakure and Konohagakure.” He leans forward slightly, smile conspiratorial. “I will seeing the outcomes of your experiments upon our mutual enemies.”

Ino laughs then. “Deal.”

Karin draws Ino and Temari into a conversation regarding the potentially lethal combination of ninjutsu and fūinjutsu. Sakura sits quietly, almost contemplative as she eats and watches as they talk. Sarutobi-sensei’s dream, her dream, of peace among the nations, is being realized here.

Indra and Ashura are, as always, alongside her, watching her eat with an almost wistful look in their eyes.

Sakura quirks a brow in their direction, unwilling to ask a verbal question in the midst of company.

“Gizzard was a staple of our childhood,” Ashura says, eyes trained on the cooked meat. “Mother had uncommon tastes and father was always willing to accommodate her.”

“It was a common dish for her to eat when she was pregnant,” Indra says. “I suppose that explains our proclivity toward it.” His eyebrows furrow. “I haven’t felt hungry since…well, I cannot remember. I’m not even sure if I’m hungry now but I certainly remember it.”

“Are you alright, Sakura?”

Sakura snaps to attention, schooling her expression as she looks at Gaara. “I’m alright, just daydreaming.”

He tilts his head, asking the question without actually asking it. Sakura nods. He nods in turn, looking at the food held in her chopsticks. “You seem to enjoy the gizzard.”

“Indeed,” Sakura says, taking a bite. She looks to the brothers again, smile fading at the longing in their eyes. “I get the feeling I’ll miss it when we leave.”

Sakura glances at the boy sitting across from her, curious as to why Karin has picked him as one of her possible seeds. He is tan, lithe, and white haired. His teeth are sharpened into points.

He is of Kirigakure stock, undoubtedly raised with the ambition to become one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist.

Currently he balances a toothpick between those deadly teeth, gazing at her with curious purple eyes.

“I am Haruno Sakura,” she says, eyes casually examining their surroundings. They are in a crowded confectionery restaurant and the din of the crowd keeps their conversation quiet. They are
completely inconspicuous.

“I know,” the boy replies, digging a finger into his ear. “Everyone in Oto knows that.”

“Suigetsu, must you be so insufferable?” Karin snaps, digging into the cute orange confectionery before her. “I’d have thought you’d matured in your time since our last meeting.”

He flashes her an obnoxious grin. “Apparently not.”

Karin huffs. Sakura glances at her incredulously, raising her eyebrows in disbelief. As far as spies go, Suigetsu does not seem cut out for this job. In fact, Sakura is a bit surprised that he’s survived Oto so long.

“Despite his appearance and appalling lack of manners, Suigetsu is pretty reliable,” Karin says, eyes begging Sakura to understand. “His special genetic makeup keeps him from being collared the same way most others are.”

“And your handlers trust you to not run away?” Sakura asks, looking at the boy once more.

He bares his teeth in a semblance of a smile. It comes across as more of a pained grimace. “I’ve earned the right. It’s taken years but they trust me outside of the cells now.”

“And what did you do before you were trusted?” Sakura probes.

“I was one of Kabuto’s pet projects, much like you will be if they ever catch you.” He isn’t making a threat, Sakura notices. Suigetsu states it as if it is a fact, a foregone conclusion.

“I doubt there’d be enough of me left after Orochimaru finished his revenge upon me,” Sakura says, remembering their last skirmish. She glances down at her leg, covered as it by her robe. She’s left a mark on Orochimaru, but it is nothing near what he left her.

Suigetsu laughs raucously. “That’s true alright. Orochimaru despises you.”

Sakura cocks her head, idly chewing on a piece of dango. “And what is it about your genetic constitution that keeps you free of Oto’s shackles? Karin has her chakra but I get the feeling you are a bit different.”

With a quick glance around their surroundings, Suigetsu’s body melts into what appears to be water before reforming. Sakura’s eyes go wide and she can hear the brothers chattering about it, but she keeps her gaze steady and sure upon the boy.

He wants to unsettle her.

“Interesting,” Sakura says. “Is that a kekkei genkai?”

Suigetsu shrugs lithely. “Probably. My brother could do it too. Anyway, Kabuto has tried to replicate the process without any success.”

“Why do you want to work with us? Why don’t you just leave Otogakure? You aren’t chained down. You could leave freely,” Sakura says, wanting to understand his motivation.

The joviality falls away from Suigetsu’s face and Sakura sees to the core of him, the potential that Karin so obviously see. “My brother is gone. My clan is dead. I’ve been branded a traitor to my home village. I don’t have the same connections or luck that Karin here has to Konoha. There is nowhere I can go that Otogakure cannot follow. I figure I do this then maybe, one of these days,
I’ll get out of Oto.”

“What is your ambition, Suigetsu?” Sakura asks. “After all of this is done and your part is known to the world. What will you do then?”

“I will collect the Seven Swords,” Suigetsu replies. “I will become the greatest of the Swordsmen.”

Sakura frowns thoughtfully, thinking of a grave, a naive promise, and childhood long passed by. Finally, she nods with the slightest of smiles. “I don’t know about all of the swords, but there is one…”

“Are you sure that Hokage-sama won’t mind this detour?” Karin asks hesitantly, following Sakura along the diverging path.

Sakura rolls her eyes affectionately. “Tsunade-sama would be surprised that you’ve never been out here before and order you to come out here again. Really, I’m just saving you another trip through the rural side of Fire.” She bows mockingly. “You’re welcome.”

Out of the corner of Sakura’s eyes, she sees Ashura making faces at her as Indra laughs at her antics. She is happy. They’ve accomplished their mission, strengthened ties with Sunagakure (honestly, the two nations’ friendship is nearly unbreakable now), and it is nice to travel with friends.

Karin laughs, shaking her head. “I still don’t get what the big deal is. It’s a tree right? Konohagakure is the ‘Village Hidden in the Leaves.’ Why is this tree such a big deal?”

“This is actually the very first tree that Hashirama-sama, our first Hokage, grew for Konoha,” Yamato explains. “While it’s technically outside of the village, Hashirama-sama initially believed this would be the site for Konoha.”

“Mito-sama actually had a hand in moving the location,” Sakura adds. “Hashirama-sama wasn’t the most skilled with cartography so he’d missed the mark by over a hundred miles. Still, Mito-sama declared that the site where he planted the tree could be made into a landmark.” Sakura pauses, grinning. “Honestly, in her journals she says she did that to make Hashirama-sama stop pouting.”

Karin giggles. “Okay, so it’s a tree, the first tree of Konoha. Weren’t there trees already in Konoha though? Why did Hashirama-sama have to plant one?”

“Actually, he had Wood Release like Yamato-san here,” Sakura says, wondering if she’s making the older man uncomfortable. It is impossible to read his face. “So he used that ability to grow the tree.”

“Most children of Konohagakure make a pilgrimage here when they are…what, eight?” Ino says, glancing to Sakura who nods. “There’s a whole lot of fanfare as for a lot of the children it’s their first time out of the village.”

Yamato smiles, a wicked edge to the curve of his upper lip. “You know, Hashirama-sama actually grew a cherry blossom tree. The children visit when it’s in full bloom.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sakura says, ears burning. “Trust me, I’m used to the heckling.”
“Huh,” Karin says, a smile tugging at her lips. “I’ll have to come back when it’s blooming.”

Sakura sees the excitement growing in her friend and she feels a bit proud of herself. She’s glad for the small moments like these where they can just be.

Yamato stops suddenly, surveying the trees surrounding them. Sakura is immediately alert, scanning as well. They are the only ones traveling at the time as the tree is far out of season.

“What—?” Sakura begins, before cutting herself off.

_Smoke._

They trade alarmed looks before running in the direction of the smoke.

No, no, no, Sakura prays. It can’t be. The tree stands alone in a clearing and Mito-sama herself placed seals on it to keep something like this from happening. It can’t be true. There must be a mistake.

Sakura’s heart contracts violently as they reach the clearing. The beloved tree of Konoha, the symbol of Konoha, is ablaze, casting off billows of acrid smoke. Sakura examines it calculatingly. All children in Konoha are taught how to read the trees and forest fires. It has been burning for over a day now.

There is no hope for the great tree.

It is hard to see into the clearing as everything is in shambles, the seals broken and ash settling heavily.

“Sakura!” Karin exclaims, voice panicked. “There are _people._”

Sakura starts, turning to her friend. “Where?” she asks hoarsely.

Yamato is completely still, face slack and pale in the face of this nightmarish truth that they stand before. Sakura ignores him for the moment, pulling out three scarves and wrapping first herself, then Karin and Ino with them. She wishes she had goggles.

Still, she follows her companions into the chaos, eyes stinging against the hot ash and smoke that fight to choke her. Eyes narrow, Sakura plows on, heedless.

This isn’t a mere forest fire.

No, it is deliberate.

It takes but minutes though it feels like a lifetime to drag four bodies out from the shadow of the dying tree.

Sakura quickly examines them, mourning the lack of breath in two of their chests. “Karin!” she exclaims. “Yamato! Try to revive those two! Ino and I’ll get started on the others.” Her chakra is no good on a dead body but if they can breathe life back into them…

She clinically peruses both of the living bodies. They are both young, not yet fully grown; genin from the looks of their headbands. She cannot identify them based on their physicality as their bodies are riddled in burns and their lungs are damaged by the smoke inhalation. Not to mention the damages that they sustained while fighting off their assailants.

Ino pulls free a scroll, releasing a couple of seals as quickly as she can. A few poultices, potions,
and medicinal herbs appear and she begins mashing them with mortar and pestle. “Stabilize them,” Ino says, intent on her mixture. “I can whip something up to assist with the smoke inhalation.”

Sakura gives her verbal assent, spreading her chakra through the children’s bodies, gently taking hold. She doesn’t have much in the way of healing chakra, but she can do this at least.

In precious few seconds, Ino is there, raising her solution within a bubble of water and moving it down their throats. Almost immediately, the children begin to cough and writhe and Sakura helps Ino turn them onto their sides. Black phlegm emerges from their throats, as the children continue to hack.

“They’re stable here,” Ino says, watching the children still as she begins another solution.

From the chosen ingredients, Sakura can tell that it’s a burn salve.

Sakura moves away from Ino, satisfied for the moment with their safety and approaches Yamato and Karin. “Report,” she says roughly, trying to keep her voice even.

Yamato looks up at her, still made unguarded and vulnerable by this attack on Konoha. “This appears to be a genin team. Konoha by their headbands. Their sensei is dead, killed in the initial ambush.” He looks to the child cradled in Karin’s lap. “That one…he cannot be revived.”

Sakura nods briskly, moving to Karin’s side and slowly lifting the child from her lap and moving him to her own.

“I know him,” Karin says in a whisper. Her eyes are unfocused. Shock. “He is…his name is Udon. He is…was…such a polite, smart boy.”

Sakura bites back a curse, looking with fresh eyes at the genin team. In her desire to keep them alive, she didn’t pay attention to their features. Now, she recognizes them, despite the burns that mar them.

Ebizo, the sensei.

Udon.

Moegi.

Konohamaru.

Sarutobi Konohamaru.

She notices then, the music note carved in ground, away from the tree. Such a simple, innocuous thing yet so incredibly insidious.

Sakura stiffens, biting a finger and slamming it down in the soot. “Kikyo!” Sakura commands as soon as the bear appears. “Message to Hokage-sama. Hashirama’s tree is dead. Team Ebizu was ambushed. Two dead, two in critical condition. Attack originated from Oto. Send a squad of Anbu and a medic. Go!” She ignores the pop that follows Kikyo’s disappearance. She turns to Yamato. “Yamato,” she says gently, knowing his connection to Hashirama. “Yamato I need you to contain the fire. Its origin is in ninjutsu so it will be difficult.”

When twin hands descend on her shoulders, Sakura doesn’t even flinch, instead sagging back slightly into their comfort. This attack…targeting Konohamaru…Sakura sighs deeply, accepting Karin’s shaking hand in her own.
Her eyes are stone and flint as she watches the dying tree, the death of Konohagakure’s peace.

They are going to war.
jōnin part I

Chapter Notes

Happy birthday to me! Here’s an update for you all! It’s certainly been a hot minute. A lot has happened in my life: I’ve moved out to CA for grad school, I’m finishing out my Master’s degree, and moving to TX to complete my PhD. I’ve gone through and edited the story, changing certain elements, adding some and removing others.

When I first wrote this story, I didn’t really have a plot or outline in mind, I just wrote. There were a ton of ideas, but only a loose narrative that barely tied it together. By this point in the story, back in the day, I felt that I wrote myself into a corner. These edits and story changes have opened things back up for me. So, a completely new chapter was added as “chūnin pt. III.” The actual story changes begin in “chūnin pt. II,” though I would suggest a read through from the beginning as all the chapters received a face lift.

From here, I’ll be continuing to write until halcyon days is complete, probably with updates about every month or so (excluding March which will be dedicated to an update of empty hands). Happy reading!

Sakura examines the wan face of the boy in the bed, feeling older than ever before. Exhaustion clings to every part of her body, causing her to stoop and limp. Her leg aches, reminding her of past failures.

She has only just gotten back from a mission gone south.

Far south.

She is still flecked with dry blood and gore but none of that matters to her right now.

Sakura gazes down at the symbol of this war, the youth that sparked an outright battle with Otogakure and caused all of the shinobi nations to cast their lots behind one of the two nations.

Sarutobi Konohamaru.

He is in some sort of coma, in a place that chakra cannot help him. He seems small and frail in the bed, blue veins bright against his translucent skin.

“It isn’t your fault, Sakura,” Indra says, hand against her shoulder.

Sakura ignores the gesture.

She thinks this is the thing that broke Sarutobi Hiruzen.

Hiruzen truly looks and acts his age now, wandering the streets of Konoha listlessly, a blank look in his eyes. Sakura knows that, much like with her leg, he blames himself for his grandson’s condition. How much must his former student destroy his life?

“Haruno,” a voice says.
Sakura turns, catching sight of Moegi. She inclines her head slightly, still in that remote state of mind.

“How dare you come here?” demands Moegi, voice hitching. Her eyes are bright with tears and resentment is clear in her entire body language. “You, who did nothing for my team?”

Sakura regards her blankly. “As I have said to you before, your teammates were dead on arrival. I managed to keep you and Konohamaru stable. It is up to him now.”

“Why? What good is medical chakra if you can’t help him?” Moegi asks.

“Chakra cannot fix everything,” Sakura says, glancing down at her prosthetic leg. Moegi flushes with chagrin or anger, Sakura cannot tell. “He is in a place where chakra cannot reach him. It’s up to him now.”

Moegi strides forward, striking out at Sakura with a fist. Sakura catches her by the wrist, putting pressure on the bones there until she hears a snap. Moegi barely whimpers. “Do not mistake my empathy for passivity. You are acting childishly and I will not tolerate attacks on my person,” says Sakura, as she begins to leave that untouchable place in her mind. All she can feel now is weariness and an exhaustion that is marrow deep. “Take care of yourself. Maybe read to Konohamaru. Sometimes people in comas can hear the voices of loved ones.”

Sakura scraps against the bottom of her well of chakra, mustering enough to heal Moegi’s wrist. Sakura regrets her decision to injure the emotionally-wrought girl. She doesn’t blame her nor is she angry. She releases the girl, stepping out of the hospital room and beginning the trek home.

“Congratulations Haruno,” she murmurs to herself as she runs wearily across the roof tops, rubbing a thumb over her hitae-ate. “You’re a jōnin now.”

“Hey now,” Ashura says, watching her with concern. “That is something to be proud of.”

Tsunade promoted her the moment she returned from the mission, new informants sealed into her skin. Sakura ignores the burn along her toes, left by dead seals turned scar white against her skin. Sacrifice is necessary when teetering on the precipice of destruction.

(Sakura just hates that the sacrifices she demands are not her own.)

“Grab a seat, Sakura!” says Kiba, gesturing to the cushion beside him.

Sakura gratefully takes the seat, Indra and Ashura at her back. She smiles at the overall ruckus of the Rookies, glad for the din. It is a nice white noise to distract her from her increasingly morose thoughts.

Mitsubachi is only the first of her losses in this war.

After Itachi took over the apartment building, Ino designated one of the empty apartments on their floor as the group dining area. So, in typical fashion, Naruto and Ino decided it is time to celebrate Shino and Sakura’s promotions to jōnin. Everyone is gathered in the room, creating a cheery, homey feeling as Sasuke and Choji cook up a storm. Karin sits next to her cousin, whispering and giggling to themselves. They are good for each other, the family that neither had. Ino, Tenten, and Shikamaru are discussing weaponry and logistics.

With Indra and Ashura at her back, Sakura truly feels at home.
Akamaru pushes his snout into Sakura’s hair, startling her out of her thoughts.

“You alright?” Kiba asks, slanting a concerned look in her direction. “You’re a bit spacey tonight.”

Sakura nods, allowing Akamaru to nuzzle into her hands as she pets him. “Things are just a little… overwhelming.”

Kiba looks at her, not accepting the evasive answer. “I heard from Tsume how your last mission went.” Sakura stiffens as he taps his nose. “It would have been difficult not to smell the blood on you when you first came through the gates. How are you doing?”

Sakura shrugs, uncomfortable with how exposed she feels.

Kiba sighs. “Cut that nonsense Sakura. I’ve dealt with Shino and Hinata’s odd moods for years now and I can smell the anger simmering under your skin. What’s up?”

“I’m just… not sure I can do this,” Sakura whispers, eyes scanning the room.

“Do what?”

“This!” hisses Sakura. “This celebration. We’re at war. I’ve been in the trenches. I’ve… lost people. People who were beyond the reach of my chakra have died in my arms.”

Kiba eyes her for a moment, humming. “You know, everyone in this room is fighting too. We may not be quite as deep in the action like you are, but we are a part of this too.” He lays a hand on her arm. “You know; I think being so enmeshed in the espionage. People aren’t supposed to emotionless beings. We hurt and bleed and die all the same. You need to remember that everyone in this room is on your side.”

Sakura glances around at the joviality in the room. Neji and Hinata are talking animatedly; Lee and Shisui are racing around the room; Naruto is picking a fight with Itachi. This, these people, is her safe place.

Sakura exhales shakily, resting her head against Kiba’s shoulder. “When did you get so observant?” she asks.

She can feel his laughter rumble through his body. “Well, I do hope to be a serious Hokage contender one day. I should be able to help my friends.”

“Still don’t know if I’ll vote for you,” Sakura murmurs, watching Naruto, his smile bright and shining. “But I am glad to be your friend.”

Kiba snorts quietly, running a hand through his unkempt hair. “Yeah, well, it’s a bit difficult to compete with him. Thankfully, it isn’t left up to you alone.” He glances across the room, smiling wryly. “I’m not the only other contender.”

Sakura follows his gaze, catching Tenten in the middle of an arm wrestling match with Sasuke. “Really?” she asks.

“She’s a disciple of Tsunade-sama,” Kiba replies. “She’s one of the strongest competitors.”

“Huh,” Sakura says, balancing her chin on her hand as new possibilities unfold in her mind.

“Oi Sasuke, stop losing to Tenten and come help Choji!” Naruto exclaims, grabbing Sasuke by the scruff of his neck and pulling him up from the table.
Sakura laughs, smiling genuinely as the food is brought out and placed on the table. It is good to remember these moments and an old memory flutters in her mind.

_Halcyon days, Haku. Somehow, someway, I’ll make these our halcyon days._ She glances back at her spirits. They smile at her, happy that she is engaging here in the present, rather than focusing on her failed mission. _This time, I won’t forget it._

“Why are we doing this?” Sai asks.

“We’re waiting to greet the guests from Kumo,” Sakura explains again for what feels like the umpteenth time. She perches on the ledge of the watchtower, swinging her legs over the walls. “And yes, it is a social convention you have to obey.”

“With the added bonus of being a mission,” Kakashi says, turning to a new page. Jiraiya has recently released a new Icha Icha volume and Kakashi has since been riveted. “We’ll get paid to escort the Kumo shinobi to their residence for their stay in Konoha.”

“Why us?” Sasuke mutters, crossing his arms. “This is a mission way below our pay grade.”

Kakashi just points his finger at Sakura.

Sakura shrugs. “Yugito specifically requested me,” she says.

“Lighten up Sasuke,” Naruto says, hopping up beside Sakura, standing on the railing of the watchtower. “Sakura hasn’t seen her Kumo friends in over a year! Besides, we’re taking them to Ichiraku.” He nearly vibrates with excitement. “Bee’s coming this time, right?”

“That’s what the letter said,” Sakura replies.

Sasuke huffs but falls into an easy silence before cautiously joining Naruto and Sakura on the railing. Sakura hides a smile, knowing that Sasuke would hate to have attention drawn to his actions.

So, she stays quiet, scooting closer to Naruto and patting the space next to her without looking back. A few moments later, Sai climbs over the rail, situating himself right next to her. Sakura closes her eyes, enjoying this soft, idyllic moment with her team. She leans her head against Sai’s shoulder, smiling when she feels him lean his cheek against her head.

What could be moments later or hours, a tap on her shoulder rouses Sakura. She blinks awake, surprised to find that she even fell asleep. She looks up, meeting Kakashi’s mismatched gaze.

“They’re nearly here,” he says, eyes crinkling upward in a smile.

Sakura covers her mouth against a yawn, sleep still clouding her mind. “Thank you, Kakashi-sensei.”

He looks down over her, fingers flexing around his book. “I haven’t said it yet, but congratulations on your promotion.”

Sakura reaches up, patting his shoulder. “Thanks, Kakashi-sensei,” she says, trying to infuse her voice with enthusiasm but knowing she falls short.

“If you…ever need to talk—” he says, keeping his tone low and almost incomprehensible.

“Yeah,” Sakura replies. “I know who to speak to.”
Kakashi nods, clearing his throat as he steps away. “Snap to attention, children; the Kumo delegation is here.”

Sakura peers out over the edge of the watchtower, waving happily down at Yugito and the shinobi who accompany her. She leaps down over the wall, landing before them.

“It is wonderful to see you again,” Sakura says, keeping herself somewhat restrained as she bows to Yugito. “I am glad to see you well.”

Yugito has no such reservations, lifting Sakura off her feet in a tight hug. Sakura wheezes, ribs creaking beneath Yugito’s grip. Yugito plants her back on the ground, grinning down at her. “You’ve grown,” she says, by way of greeting.

“Good to see you haven’t changed,” Sakura replies. She glances at the people she has with her, all unknown chūnin. “Where’s Bee?”

Yugito’s smile falls away. “He’s indisposed at the moment,” she says, eyes cutting to their surroundings. “We’ll speak of it in the Tower.”

“Of course,” Sakura says, setting off toward the gates. “Yugito, allow me to introduce you to Sai…”

As her teammates familiarize themselves with Yugito and the Kumo shinobi, Sakura takes in Yugito’s profile. She has newfound scars, most prominently along her cheek and clipping across her ear. There are hairline wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and Sakura realizes with a start that Yugito has changed, however slightly. Then again, as Sakura looks down at her feet, she knows she’s changed too.

They leave the chūnin at the embassy, leading Yugito, as team leader, to the Kage Tower. Tsunade-hime, Tenten, and Shizune are waiting, seats set up for each of them. Yugito takes one of the seats and the rest of Team Seven joins her.

Tsunade frowns at the single empty seat in the room. “Where is Killer Bee? A-sama said he would be visiting as well.”

“He was supposed to,” Yugito replies. “However, Bee is currently being carefully tended by his brother.”

“He was injured?” Shizune asks.

Yugito shakes her head. “A-sama is being protective, possibly overly so. A week ago, a duo from Akatsuki made an attempt to subdue and capture Bee. From Bee’s description, they seem to have been Deidara and his new partner, an individual who refers to himself as Tobi.” Sakura furrows her brow, wracking her brain for someone of that name. No one comes to mind. “Bee and Gyūki fended just fine, but A-sama was concerned about him leaving the village.”

“Do you know the purpose of this attack?” Tsunade asks, keeping her expression unreadable.

“A similar attack was made against me nearly six months ago by Akatsuki members Hidan and Kakuzu,” Yugito replies. “Thankfully I was out on a patrol with a small squad of Kiri and Kumo shinobi.” She frowns, tracing a pattern along her sheathed tanto. “At the time, it seemed random. They did not really show their hand during that first attempt, aside from the fact that they were trying to incapacitate rather than kill. In light of recent events, I believe that Akatsuki is targeting jinchūriki.”
Sakura’s eyes are trained on Tsunade and, when she nods assent, Sakura says, “They aren’t making attempts on Kumo’s jinchūriki alone. I discovered while in Iwa that attempts were made on both of their jinchūriki. One was successful.” Sakura remembers the air battle, her first encounter with Sasori. “The other was not. From what I understand, Iwa still hasn’t recovered Roshi’s body.” Her gaze shifts to the ground as she fiddles with the ring she wears on a chain around her neck. “The capture of Gaara and the successful extraction of Shukaku was rather high profile.”

“And have such attempts been made on you?” Yugito asks, turning to Naruto.

“We weren’t sure,” Naruto says, scrubbing a hand down his cheek. “Our team is made up pretty high-profile, flashy people. Sometimes they’re after Sasuke’s dojutsu; sometimes they have a score to settle with Kaka-sensei; sometimes they want to try their luck against the Pacifist Ninja who killed an Akatsuki member. It can be difficult to keep track!”

“Akatsuki has approached our team before,” Kakashi says. “Truthfully, I thought they had a score to settle with Sakura. However, in light of recent news…”

“Akatsuki is encroaching on jinchūriki from all of the nations,” Sakura says. “They’ve been successful with Roshi and they almost succeeded with Gaara…” She looks at Tsunade. “Do we know the fates of the three-tails, six-tails, or seven-tails?”

“The three- and six-tails were sold to Kiri by Hashirama-sama following the Summit,” Tenten says. “Has anything been reported to you, Tsunade-shishou?”

Tsunade shakes her head. “In the upheaval following the coup, many things have fallen through the cracks in Kiri. Neither of the jinchūriki has been brought up by Mei in any of our communications. I will pen a missive requesting more specific information.”

“In the meantime, I will see if we can suss out the potential motives for Akatsuki to collect the jinchūriki,” Sakura says, feeling Ashura and Indra’s presences against her back. “Perhaps an answer to the future lies in the past.”

Tsunade nods, smiling grimly at them all. “Thank you for bringing this to our attention, Nii-san. We will begin investigating this as well. With all of our resources pooled together, I am sure we will uncover the answer.” Her eyes cut to Naruto. “You will be remaining in the village until further notice.” She raises her hand against his immediate protest. “We will not recklessly gamble your life away, Naruto. This is not open to negotiation. Until we have a clearer idea of Akatsuki’s goals, you will stay in the village.”

Naruto, beneath the looks of Tsunade and his teammates, huffs out a sigh, deflating in the face of their resolve. “For now,” he says, almost a warning. “This is only temporary. I suppose Karin and I can get started on some new fūinjutsu techniques…”

Yugito smiles as Naruto begins to ramble, but Sakura can still see the concern in her eyes, reflected in Tsunade’s gaze as well. Sakura stands, leaving the office with more questions than answers.

Sakura returns to the place where she first received answers as a child: Sarutobi-sensei’s library. Technically, it now belongs to Tsunade as she is the reigning Hokage, however, it is Sarutobi-sensei who maintains the library, adding to the collection there.

(It is one of the few tasks he still completes, along with his gardening. Rage burrows deep within Sakura’s chest as she is confronted with yet another thing that Orochimaru and Oto have stolen from her.)
Sakura presents her card to the guards on duty before making her way into the library. It is a decently sized room, filled from floor to ceiling with pigeon holed walls and shelves. All are stuffed to the seams with scrolls, ranging from clan lineages to shifting trade routes to censuses of Konoha’s population.

Sakura chooses none of these, walking to the section with which she is vastly familiar. A wave of nostalgia washes over her as she explores the history section, touching scrolls that she spent many afternoons reading as a child.

“You’re smiling,” Ashura observes.

“This was the first way I got to know you,” Sakura says, lifting free one of the scrolls with gentle fingers. It is fragile, yellowed with age, but preserved with ninjutsu as are all the scrolls in the library. She unfurls it, showing the brothers a scene that depicts their final battle. “Before I spoke to you or even acknowledged your existence, I sought out answers for the spirits I was seeing in the classroom.” She smiles wryly. “When a voice resides within your head, you can never be too careful. I wasn’t sure if you were hallucinations or malignant ghosts. Then I stumbled across this story and realized the truth.”

Indra leans in, scowl marring his expression. “My nose is not that wide.”

“Face it, Indra-nii,” Ashura says, grinning at his brother’s disgruntled expression. “I’ve always been the handsome one.”

Sakura laughs at that, shaking her head as she replaces the scroll on the shelf. “Regardless, there is enough of a resemblance that I was able to figure it out,” she says, maneuvering around them.

“I notice you didn’t rebut my statement,” Ashura says, folding his arms around Sakura’s shoulders from behind. He smiles in a taunting manner at Indra. “Guess you agree that I’m the most handsome Ōtsutsuki.”

Indra scoffs, shaking his head. “This is a ridiculous conversation.”

“You just can’t accept the truth,” Ashura says, ducking his face into Sakura’s hair as she sifts through the scrolls, looking for material on the Founding Era.

Sakura glances up, catching Indra’s stormy expression. Taking that as the foreboding it is, she moves out from Ashura’s embrace, turning to address them both. “The both of you are very pretty,” she says, doing her best to hide her amusement. Who would believe that this childish a conversation would occur between such legendary figures? “Ashura, you have a very striking mouth and jawline. Indra, you have beautiful eyes.” She says these words in a calm, matter of fact manner, almost as if she is merely discussing the weather rather than their looks. “Now please, I am searching for something specific.”

So saying, Sakura turns back to the scrolls, glad when the brothers fall to silence. She draws forth a few promising scrolls regarding the jinchūriki and their origins. With her back to them, Sakura is oblivious to the way that both brothers cover their faces, embarrassed by her praise.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Sakura murmurs to herself, taking a seat at one of the few tables in the room.

She finds Jiraiya, as expected, seated in one of the seedier bars within Konoha. Patrons are mainly shinobi, however, at this time of day, only Jiraiya is present. (This is where Team Seven went following the mission in the Land of Waves to simultaneously mourn and celebrate their true
What is unexpected is his brooding mood, his lack of flirtation (more like harassment) of the busty bartender, and the large bottle of hard imported spirits in front of him.

“Jiraiya-sama…” Sakura says, grabbing the stool next to him and sitting. “Naruto told me you were in the village.”

“I figured that since he’s been confined for the time being that I would stay here to teach him,” Jiraiya says, staring down into his glass. “Need to pull my weight as a teacher.”

“That’s kind of you,” Sakura says, taking a glass from the bartender with a nod of thanks. She pours some of the liquor into the glass, taking a bracing gulp. It burns, but she gets it down without coughing. “I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about Amegakure.”

“Amegakure?” To his credit, Jiraiya doesn’t even flinch, but there’s a thready weight to his voice, a recognition he cannot hide. “What about it?”

“It is the home base of Akatsuki,” Sakura says. “I know that you spent time in Amegakure during the Second War. When I asked Tsunade-hime about her experiences there, she directed me your way.”

“Ah, Tsunade-hime is a master of skirting a topic. She learned that from Sarutobi-sensei. We learned a lot of things from Sarutobi-sensei,” Jiraiya says, before chuckling wetly. “Kami, like teacher like pupil.”

“What do you mean?” Sakura asks, stealing the bottle from his hand and pouring herself a glass. “How are you like Sarutobi-sensei?”

“A long time ago, perhaps when I was a year or two older than you are now, Konoha went to war; to what would one day be called the Second Shinobi World War,” Jiraiya begins, suddenly looking his age, face carved with misery and sorrow. “Now my team, Team One, which was, you know, me, Tsunade-hime, and Orochimaru, was one of the best and the brightest.

“We were sent to the front lines. It was…” Jiraiya shudders. “It was horrendous. We-I had killed before but never on this scale, never had we seen civilian casualties. Not like this.

“Look, Sakura, you can’t understand what we saw. Civilians from war-torn countries would travel for hundreds upon hundreds of miles, emaciated, poor, filthy, and destitute to the Land of Fire seeking asylum.

“We…there were these orders you see,” Jiraiya says, grabbing her hands and pulling her close. Sakura can smell the alcohol, cloying and strong, on his breath. “We were ordered to turn away anyone who came to us from Sunagakure or Amegakure. If...if they refused then we—then we—”

Jiraiya cuts himself off, lifting his glass and swallowing all of its contents.

Sakura, feeling sick to her stomach and suddenly realizing one of the more tragic consequences to war, swallows and places her hand on his shoulder, rubbing in small circles. She glances at her spirit companions who look solemn and wan.

“Was it like this for you?” she signs with her free hand.

Seeing this man, considered one of the brightest of the shinobi world, humbled like this; haunted by his past…it hurts.
Will this be her? If they go to war with Akatsuki, Iwa, and Oto, truly go to war, will she be broken down and remade into something less human?

Sakura glances down at her leg and grimaces. She’s already broken once and doesn’t think she’ll survive a second time.

“Something similar,” Ashura says, mouth lined with pain and tragedy.

Sakura swallows and ignores the way her eyes burn.

“Well, when our team was in Amegakure, I came across a trio of orphans,” Jiraiya says, voice thick with the memories. “They were... well, they were brilliant, prodigies in their own right. They would have excelled as Konoha shinobi. I decided to train them.” His gaze is bleak as he stares into his cup. “It was a mistake.

“They were fantastic students, quick learners. They were my first students,” Jiraiya says. “I loved them like my own children. They were my children. Unfortunately, I could not stay with them for long periods of time. War waits for no one and Team One had the lion’s share of assignments. I set them up in a safe house in Ame, but I could never bring them to Konoha with me because of the laws in place.

“I thought of them as my own children, I still carry the trinkets they gave me when they were young. They were the only bright spot in that whole damn war. For a while, we were happy, then everything went wrong.”

“How?” Sakura asks, voice soft as she pushes for an answer.

“The three of them, each of them held a grudge against Konohagakure. They were blinded by hatred of an entire nation. At times, I thought they hated me as well. Certainly, they hate me now.” Jiraiya’s expression is bleak. “I... my whole team was called back to Konoha.

“I left them behind,” Jiraiya says, voice cracking on a bitter laugh, “Can you imagine? Leaving three twelve-year-olds in the very heart of the war? I was a coward.”

“Jiraiya-sama—”

“Don’t ‘Jiraiya-sama’ me! I’m not worthy of such a title. I was too spineless to defy the rules. I abandoned those children and the Will of Fire at the same time.” Jiraiya’s eyes slide shut. “And I fear I have damned us all.”

“What do you mean?” Sakura says, fear creeping up her spine.

“The orphans? Their names are Konan, Nagato, and Yahiko, though I suppose Yahiko goes by the name ‘Pein’ now.” Sakura inhales sharply. “Yes. Those three founded Akatsuki. They are the ones who ended the Second Shinobi World War.”

Sakura recognizes all but one of the names. “Nagato?” Sakura asks, still reeling from the implications of Jiraiya’s statement.

“He died liberating Amegakure,” Jiraiya says.

“So what is their goal now?” Sakura asks.

“Akatsuki’s end goal is what it has been from the beginning: world peace at any cost necessary,” Jiraiya says, rubbing at the exhaustion that rings his eyes. “Even catalyzing another World War.
This time, however, I fear that Amegakure will not be the only nation left in ruins.”

Sakura hums, considering the possibilities and what they mean for Konoha.

“Know this Sakura,” Jiraiya says, voice soft as he clasps her hand. In that moment, he looks sober, “we create our own worst enemies, one way or another.”

Sakura nods and takes his words to heart, engraving them in her mind. She will learn from those who came before her or she will be doomed to repeat their mistakes.

(If she hasn’t already.)

“Alright, Jiraiya,” she says, standing and hefting him up. He cannot walk on his own. “Lead me to your residence; you need to sleep this off.”

He releases a lecherous giggle that has Sakura rolling her eyes and the Ōtsutsuki brothers threatening death.

It is good to see some things remain unchanged.

Still, Sakura will never forget their conversation, held beneath flickering lanterns and the sour stench of ale.

She cannot afford to forget.

“You look well.”

“As do you, Chōjūrō-san,” Sakura replies, leading him and Tenten away from the Tower. “It has been a while.”

Mei-sama’s response to Tsunade-hime’s request for information is swift and forthright, as she sent her trusted student to speak of Kirigakure’s jinchuuriki situation or, rather, the lack thereof. According to Chōjūrō, the two jinchuuriki were lost shortly before the coup and, in the ensuing chaos, neither of their bodies were recovered.

Considering that one of the jinchuuriki, containing the three tailed beast, was the former Mizukage, Mei-sama hasn’t deemed the issue all that important. Now, in light of the information made available by their allies, the hunt is on to, at the very least, recover the jinchuuriki bodies.

(Sakura doesn’t care for the callous treatment of these lost jinchuuriki, imagining Yugito, Bee, or Han in their place. Or, kami forbid, Gaara or Naruto. Sakura would willingly rend the world in two for any of their sakes and the fact that these jinchuuriki are forgotten, unmourned, hurts.)

Still, there is little they can currently do in Konoha, though Chōjūrō will stay a few days as Tsunade-hime compiles a written report to return to Mei-sama. So, Sakura is leading Tenten and Chōjūrō to one of the training grounds so that they can test their mettle against each other.

Anticipation thrums through Sakura, excited to bear witness to a battle between two of greatest weapon enthusiasts that she has ever met.

Whatever the outcome, it is bound to be legendary.

Sakura takes a seat against one of the trees as both Chōjūrō and Tenten draw their scrolls.

“Sakura tells me you’re one of the Swordsmen,” Tenten says, something playful and lively in her
gaze. “I suppose such a title gives away your weapon preference, doesn’t it?”

“S-so it seems,” Chōjūrō replies, beginning the process of unwrapping Hiramekarei. “I’d hate to disappoint.”

“I doubt you will,” Tenten says, still working on her seals. “I hope you don’t mind me using a less traditional weapon; I was introduced to it by some blacksmiths and thought it may translate well to close combat battle.”

Chōjūrō leans forward, interest piqued. “Basically anything that can be used as a weapon has been in Kiri,” he says. “We’re taught to value creativity when it comes to weaponry.”

Tenten smiles as, with a flourish, her warhammer appears from within its scroll. She lifts it, testing its familiar heft before settling it on her shoulder. The head of the hammer is massive, larger than Tenten’s head, blunted on one end and sharpened into a wicked spike on the other. Its coloring is a dappled grey and copper, unusual for shinobi weapons, but good for conductivity. She glances at Chōjūrō, smirking as she casually twirls the warhammer in one hand.

“This is Kurību,” Tenten says.

Sakura wonders if this is what infatuation looks like as she takes in Chōjūrō’s slack expression, quickly replaced with an excited gleam in his eyes.

“This is Hiramekarei,” he says, lifting the sword out of its bandages. “I take it we will be wielding chakra through our weapons?”

The sword is the definition of oversized next to Chōjūrō’s wiry frame. Sakura can feel the chakra humming through both weapons, wells of power stored there on a nearly daily basis for encounters such as these.

“Of course,” Tenten replies.

“Before the two of you get started,” Sakura says, moving around the perimeter of the training field. Both flinch, as if they forgot she is present. “Allow me to raise the barrier. I’d hate to see damage done to any of the other fields.” She knows, considering the competitive set of their expressions, that they will deal some collateral damage.

Thusly chastised, the pair waits as Sakura draws the simple symbols of the barrier at the four corners of the training ground. A thin, shimmery dome emerges from the symbols, spreading over and encompassing the entirety of the field. Sakura nods with satisfaction and moves back to sit against her tree, safely outside of the barrier.

Chōjūrō and Tenten stare at each other for several tense moments. Then, by some unknown signal, they dash forward, driving their weapons against each other. They meet with a thunderous clang, metal singing against metal. They hold that position for a bit, testing each other’s raw strength, without the aid of chakra.

Tenten begins to push him back, her training with Tsunade coming in handy as she overpowers him. He twists to the side, shoving Kurību down and to the left as he whirls past her.

They leap away from each other and both begin to funnel chakra into their weapons. Chōjūrō’s blade lengthens, lit with glowing blue energy. Tenten twists her warhammer in hand, chakra flowing through the weapon. The spike on its end lengthens with chakra until it is almost a sickle in nature.
“Wow, they’re really going all out, aren’t they?”

Sakura turns, smiling as way of greeting to Neji. She pats the root next to her, scooting to the side and ignoring the way the brothers grumble as Neji takes their seat. They may be incorporeal to everyone but her, but they still don’t care for the sensation of someone passing through them.

“Tenten’s been excited for this spar since she heard me speak about my time in Kiri.” Sakura watches the two engaging on the field. They move so gracefully, comfortably using their weapons as extensions of themselves, that it looks like dancing. A lethal dance to be sure, but a dance nonetheless. “It’s been a long time coming.”

“She was supposed to meet us for a team lunch,” Neji says. “We all split up to look for her, but kami knows that Gai-sensei and Lee have turned it into a competition of some sort.” He rolls his eyes, but there is a begrudging fondness that lingers at the corners of his lips. “I remembered Tenten mentioning that a delegate from Kiri would be arriving this week and it wasn’t too far a stretch to figure out where they’d be.”

Sakura laughs at that, glancing back to the sparring pair. They circle each other, assessing. Sakura notes that Chōjūrō has separated Hiramekarei into its dual sword form. Considering that Sakura only managed to get him to that point a scant handful of times, she can tell that Tenten is driving him hard.

“You’re clever,” she says, looking back to Neji. Past him, she can see that various sparring matches have fizzled out, as many shinobi stop to watch the fight between Tenten and Chōjūrō. It is a rare sight in Konoha to see a Swordsman in action and pride fills Sakura at the way that Tenten more than holds her own against him. “When do you think the rest of your team will arrive?”

“I give it another ten minutes or so,” Neji says, leaning back against the tree as his Byakugan springs to life. He watches the movements of Chōjūrō and Tenten intently. “One of them will begin a lap around the village and it unerringly brings them here.”

Sakura snorts, returning her attention to the fight. Sure enough, just shy of ten minutes later, Gai and Lee appear with an ostentatious flare only they can pull off.

“Tenten is truly showing us the Will of Fire!” Gai exclaims, pumping his fist in the air wildly. Tears of joy stream down his face. “Truly, this is a match of the ages!”

Sakura smiles to herself as Gai and Lee carry on, returning her attention to the match. There is a crackle of energy and a heavy scent of ozone as Tenten runs a hand across her warhammer. The veins of copper spark with electricity as Tenten harnesses her elemental chakra across the broad head of the hammer. She strikes out with the spiked end, bringing Kurību down across both of Chōjūrō’s blades as he raises Hiramekarei to defend himself. His muscles seize as lightning dances across his body and Tenten takes advantage, reversing her strike and clipping his side with the head.

Chōjūrō wavers for a moment, before crumpling to the ground.

There is a moment of stunned silence and then the training grounds erupt in a smattering of applause, none louder than Gai and Lee. Tenten has come far since her bout with Temari during the exams. Sakura makes quick work of the seals and strides closer to the combatants.

Tenten assists Chōjūrō to stand, speaking with him softly. Their clothes are streaked with sweat and Tenten brushes back errant strands of hair. Chōjūrō has a slightly more charred look to him, but they sport matching grins. As Sakura approaches, she can hear them discussing techniques and
swapping tips. Tenten throws an arm around Chōjūrō’s shoulder, offering camaraderie and support in one motion.

Sakura looks back as a swarm of people descend upon Tenten and Chōjūrō exulting over their spar. This is what intra-village friendship is all about. Ashura and Indra stand at the fringes, looking to her.

She lifts a hand to them and signs, “Halcyon days.”

“Have you noticed that Akatsuki always keeps its number of core members consistent?” Sakura asks, staring up at the ceiling as she tosses Sasori’s ring up in the air before catching it repeatedly. “Do you think there’s some significance to that?”

She is situated in her bedroom, brainstorming about Akatsuki and their motivations. Ashura and Indra are with her, acting as her sounding board. She has gathered tons of miscellaneous bits about Akatsuki and the jinchuuriki, but now it is the time to meld it all together into a coherent narrative.

“When Orochimaru was cast out, Deidara took his place. When Sasori was killed, they took on a new member, Tobi.” Sakura frowns, irritated by how little she knows about Tobi. He is in none of the bingo books and his former village allegiances are unknown. It is as if Tobi does not exist. Sakura hates missing puzzle pieces. “While they always have scores of lower ranked initiates, the number of core members are always the same. They’ve consistently kept to ten members at a time.”

“Many people hold superstitions regarding numbers,” Indra says, eyes following the arc of Sasori’s ring. “Perhaps their leader is one such individual.”

“Perhaps,” Sakura says, flipping the ring. She stares at the kanji for “jewel.” “Somehow I doubt it’s related to the eccentricities of their leader. I don’t think they’d be so accommodating without the number holding some significance. There has to be something more...something related to these rings...”

“Consider it broadly,” Ashura says. “Is there significance in the number ten elsewhere?”

Sakura startles, scrambling from her bed. She races to her desk, grabs a scroll, and begins to jot down her thoughts, ignoring Ashura and Indra’s questions.

Finally, she sits back, looking at the two columns she’s written. She turns it to the Ōtsutsuki brothers. “Ten Akatsuki members, nine jinchuuriki. The numbers are close; is it at all possible that the two are related?”

Ashura and Indra exchange looks and, despite their ghostly pallor, Sakura can tell see them go even paler.

“What is it?” Sakura asks.

“Jūbi,” Ashura says, voice soft.

It niggles one of Sakura’s memories, a night spent beneath the starry sky as she tried to unravel the mystery of jinchūriki. “The ten-tailed beast,” she says, eyes lighting with new knowledge. “Your father was the first jinchūriki.”

They nod.
Sakura adds Jūbi to the list, scrubbing her mouth in a contemplative fashion. “Ten Akatsuki for ten jinchūriki; that cannot be a coincidence. And they’re gathering the jinchūriki and ripping the tailed beast from them. It isn’t the jinchūriki they’re after, but the tailed beasts.”

“They want to reunite the tailed beasts,” Indra says. “They want to resurrect Jūbi.”

Sakura swallows against her suddenly dry throat. “Jūbi, as in the creature that nearly ended the world; Jūbi, the beast that your father could not kill but instead sealed within himself. That Jūbi?”

Indra and Ashura nod.

“Is there any chance that someone could control it?” Sakura asks, gut churning uncomfortably.

“Father said it was the toughest battle he ever faced,” Ashura says, voice quiet. “I have yet to meet anyone on par with father’s skills.”

“In summoning Jūbi, they will ensure the world’s destruction,” Indra adds.

Sakura stares down at the scroll. She remembers her conversation with Jiraiya in the bar. “Maybe that’s exactly what they want.” She sighs and gets to her feet. “It’s still only a theory, but I need to share this with Tsunade-hime.”

“You’re sure about this?” Tsunade asks, staring Sakura down from across the table.

“It’s still a theory,” Sakura says, caution taking precedence. “But it certainly seems grounded and viable.”

“It makes sense,” Tsunade says. “What do you think Akatsuki’s ultimate goal here is? What will they do should they summon Jūbi?”

“That’s where things get murky.” Sakura crosses her arms. “From what Jiraiya has said regarding his former students, their goal is world peace. I’ve read through a few of the missives they penned to Jiraiya during the Second War and it certainly seems to hold up. Why then summon Jūbi?”

“They need serious power to pull off such a maneuver,” Tsunade says, leaning forward as she warms to the task at hand. “Harnessing the power of the ten-tailed beast—a creature with the strength of all of the tailed beasts combined—well it would certainly go a long way toward cowing people into submission.”

“But Jūbi cannot be tamed,” Sakura replies. “It isn’t like the other tailed beasts; the only jinchūriki for Jūbi has been Hagoromo. Jūbi was born of Ōtsutsuki Kaguya and her intent to repossess all chakra for herself.”

“How do you know all of this?” Tsunade asks, eyes narrowing. She raises a hand before Sakura can respond. “And don’t give me the excuse of ‘finding it in an ancient text.’ You are not the only one with access to the Hokage Library. The way you speak of it is almost like firsthand knowledge.”

Sakura glances around, catching sight of the brothers in her periphery. She slumps, knowing it is past time to tell Tsunade. “Is this room completely sealed?”

Tsunade’s jaw tightens. “Do you question my capability to keep my office safe from prying ears? The moment you told me that you had pressing, international information, I sealed off my office completely.”
“I apologize Tsunade-hime,” Sakura says, ducking her head in apology. “What I’m about to share is…sensitive information.”

“More sensitive than our current discussion?”

“Perhaps with greater consequences for me,” Sakura replies as she takes a deep breath. “I’ve been seeing the spirits of Ōtsutsuki Indra and Ōtsutsuki Ashura since childhood.”

Tsunade’s jaw goes slack. Sakura watches as Tsunade reaches beneath her desk, pulling free a bottle of sake.

“Is this really the best time, Tsunade-hime?” Sakura asks.

“We’re currently at war with my former teammate; we have a terrorist organization led by my other teammate’s students trying to revive a creature that I thought to be a fairytale; and one of my Jonin shinobi just informed me that she sees the dead and presumably communes with them.”

Tsunade pours out a glass, throwing it back like a shot. She pours another and then grabs a glass for Sakura. “If there has ever been a time to drink, it is right now.”

Sakura contemplates her words and the cup for a moment before lifting the glass in a silent toast. “Fair enough,” she says, as she sips on the sake. They sit in silence for a few moments as Tsunade downs glass after glass of sake. At least she isn’t drinking directly from the bottle. “You’re taking this better than I expected.”

“It explains more than it doesn’t,” Tsunade says with a lithe shrug. “You’ve always had a strange amount of knowledge on things far beyond your time. You’ve been uncannily perceptive of the politics among the nations. You seeing spirits is a better explanation than others.”

Sakura smiles. “Sarutobi-sensei felt the same way.”

“I’m sure he had a million questions,” Tsunade says, lips lifting in a soft, reminiscing lilt. “Sarutobi-sensei has always been interested in the philosophical, theoretical nature of things. I personally am more interested in the practical. Kaguya was the mother of chakra and grandmother of Ashura and Indra, correct?” Sakura nods. “So they are certain that Jūbi was created by Kaguya?”

Sakura nods, looking at the brothers. “Kaguya was jealous of her sons and the chakra that they wielded. She saw chakra as a precious thing, something that belonged to her alone. Hagoromo and Haruma shared chakra with the world and Kaguya was not pleased. She combined her life force with the God Tree and from this union Jūbi was born. Hagoromo and Haruma engaged in a ferocious battle with their mother and managed to seal Jūbi within Hagoromo, creating the first jinchūriki. When Hagoromo was nearing death, he split Jūbi into nine separate beasts for fear of its power otherwise. Thus we have the nine tailed beasts.”

“So, if Jūbi is such a cataclysmic being, why would Akatsuki pursue it?” Tsunade asks, tapping her fingers along the desk. “It seems counterintuitive.”

Sakura glances at the spirits, bolstered by their encouraging nods. She knows she is going out on a limb here. “We think they may be manipulated,” she says. “Knowledge of Jūbi is esoteric at best and to be seeking it for such an antithetical purpose to what it actually is…well, it is possible that someone else is pulling the strings.”

“You think Pein is not the true leader of Akatsuki,” Tsunade murmurs.

“Perhaps,” Sakura says. “I do think that they’ve been misled regarding the true nature of Jūbi.”
Tsunade examines her, steepling her fingers. “You have a plan.”

Sakura gives a one shoulder shrug, smile wobbling. “It’s a risky plan.”

“But a plan nonetheless.” Tsunade sighs, turning toward the window. “We’re in a precarious position, Sakura. Oto has been hounding our borders and Akatsuki is picking off teams that travel outside of Fire. There have been sightings of Oto shinobi using patterns of attack identical to those of Iwa.” Her frown deepens. “Onoki has always been a tricky bastard. He’s waging war but refusing to declare it.

“We’re the strongest we’ve been in decades because of our alliances with Kumo, Kiri, and Suna. However, those same alliances have painted a target on us for the unallied nations. We’re seen as a threat. Whatever your plan is, if it can remove Akatsuki’s focus from us, I’d appreciate it.”

Sakura bites her lip, ignoring the vehement denial written in the Ōtsutsuki brothers’ faces. “It starts with a gamble.”

Tsunade’s eyes gleam. “My favorite kind of plan.”

“Look, I’m just asking you to take care of Kiki and water my plants. Seriously, Ino will kill me…”

“Where are you going?” Karin demands once more, glaring up into Sakura’s face.

Sakura sighs, knowing that she won’t be able to get away without giving some sort of explanation. “Look, I have a clan related task—”

“Why?” Karin asks. “You haven’t been involved with your clan in years.”

Sakura’s gaze flickers to her ever-present spirit companions as they laugh at her predicament. Her friends are too perceptive. “Look, what I’m doing is important for more than just the Haruno clan. It’s a mission of sorts. There’s a lot of bureaucracy and politics involved but the short story is that Konoha isn’t allowed to take missions in Ame. Yes, we’re going to Amegakure,” she says, cursing the slip of her tongue. “I have someone I need to speak to.”

“Does this have anything to do with that ring you wear around your neck?” Karin asks, eyes drifting to the chain that shows above the collar of Sakura’s shirt.

“Yes,” Sakura replies. “I can’t tell you more than that.”

“Sakura!” Karin exclaims, biting back the curses that want to flow from her tongue. Why is her friend so difficult? She grabs Sakura by her shirt, pulling her in. “You don’t get to pull this cryptic bullshit with me after you transfer all of the seals on your seeds to me!”

Sakura waves her hands around, trying to comfort her friend. “It’s just a precaution! Karin, no matter what happens, the mission cannot fail.” Her eyes are solemn. “We cannot allow war to reach Konohagakure’s gates. Otogakure and Iwagakure are ever looming threats, but I have to attend to other pressing matters. It’s a roundabout way of fighting, but I’m fighting nevertheless.”

“Why?” Karin asks, voice cracking. “Why do you do this to yourself, time and time again? You’ve given your childhood, your innocence, and even your fucking leg,” She ignores the way Sakura flinches. She needs to hear this, “to Konoha. What’s next? Your life?” Karin’s gaze blurs with the sting of tears. “You’re going to end up in an unmarked grave far away from home and from your friends. Is it worth it?”
Karin gasps as Sakura’s arms wrap around her in a tight hug. Sakura’s hugs are Karin’s favorite. They are strong and warm and Sakura always smells of resin and sweat and starlight. When Sakura hugs her, Karin is able to forget Oto and all the painful memories associated with the place.

“This is why it is worth it,” Sakura says, voice vibrating into Karin’s chest, solid and real. “This is why I will continue to fight. If I end up in an unmarked grave, so be it. Though honestly, what enemy is going to be courteous enough to bury me?”

“Sakura!” Karin exclaims, shoving her shoulder.

Sakura laughs, pulling away. “I tease. In any case, most of these seals should have been yours in the first place. You are the one who convinced them to join our cause.”

“I guess I did, didn’t I?” Karin says.

“Yes, you did,” Sakura says. “Don’t ever underestimate your abilities, Uzumaki Karin. Your time in Oto…while it was horrible, it has given you a platform to reach those who are in similar straits.”

“I’m going to miss you,” Karin says.

“You won’t even know I’m gone!” Sakura promises. “So you will watch my plants and my cat?”

“Yes, yes,” Karin says, rolling her eyes.

“Now, Sasuke’s cooking dinner tonight so I suggest coming over and letting him mother-hen you all he wants,” Sakura says, heading for the door. “I need to catch my meeting with Tsunade-hime.”

Karin waves Sakura off, a frown curling up her lips as she watches Sakura go. “Be safe,” she asks, prays, pleads to any deity that will hear her. “Kami, please be safe.”

“Look, I’m not so sure about this,” Indra says, watching Sakura as she falls back onto her bed. He acquiesces when she pats the spot next to her. “This mission puts you in the direct line of fire. If anything goes wrong, you’ll be in the crossfire.”

“I know,” Sakura says. “Still, we’re weighing the risks to me against all of Konoha. You know which one wins out.”

“For you maybe,” Ashura says darkly. “Should we lose you…”

“You won’t,” Sakura replies. “Even if things go wrong, worst case scenario is we reunite as spirits.”

“That isn’t good enough,” Indra says. “You shouldn’t go alone.”

“That’s why I have the two of you,” Sakura replies, looking at him drolly. “As I seem to recall I have two rather large, somewhat annoying ghosts who like to follow me around and haunt me.”

“Hey!” Ashura yelps, falling into her bed on the other side. “I resent that statement.”

“You resemble that statement,” Indra snaps, arm resting lightly across Sakura’s stomach. “You forgot to add ‘talkative.’”

Sakura rolls her eyes and moves Indra’s arm to a more comfortable position. She is well-used to their immaterial-ness at this point, odd though it may be. They are there just…incomplete. She wonders if they, the three of them, will ever figure out how the brothers came back into being and
how they continue to grow in power.

Sometimes, she doubts they will.

“That doesn’t apply to you though,” Sakura replies, snuggling down into the pillows.

“As much as I hate to admit it, I agree with Indra,” Ashura says, throwing his leg over Sakura’s.

(Sakura adores the way that he doesn’t care that it isn’t flesh and bone. He never has.)

“Wow, you two agreeing? Must be the world’s end,” Sakura mutters, snorting when Indra dances his fingers across her stomach in retaliation.

“Don’t try to change the subject,” Ashura admonishes. “You’re going into a nation notorious for its cruel techniques with only us as your companions.”

“We’re doing reconnaissance on Akatsuki,” Sakura replies. “Their leader resides there. I’m just going to talk and explain. Hopefully, there will be no fights at all.”

“We’re just looking out for you, Sakura,” Ashura says, running soothing fingers through her long hair. “We worry.”

“I know you do,” Sakura says, reaching out and taking one of their hands. She intertwines her fingers with theirs, used to their cool, inhuman touch. She revels in it now. “And I thank you for caring but I know I can do this. It’s a gambit, but one with lots of rewards.”

“And risks,” Indra says, hand tightening reflexively around hers.

“Well, I suppose we’ll deal with that if it comes to it,” Sakura says, glancing down at her leg. She remembers her time among the other villages. “Trust me when I say that I’ve learned the consequences of naivety.”

Indra sighs, smoothing her hair back from her face. “Indeed you have. Are you ready for bed?”

Sakura, recognizing the attempt to change the subject, allows it as she nods. “Yeah, just got to remove this,” She gestures to her leg, “and I’ll be good to go.”

“I’m on it,” Ashura says, unfurling from his reclining position before gently taking her leg in both hands.

Sakura groans as he releases her leg, the tension of the day draining from her.

“Does your leg truly taxa you that much?” Indra asks even as Ashura starts rubbing the stump.

“No, not really,” Sakura says. “It doesn’t hurt at all actually, just makes me a bit sore you know? My leg is just so much lighter without the prosthetic on.” She raises her leg in the air, out of Ashura’s pleasant ministrations, wiggling it around for emphasis, “And I won’t be able to take it off during the mission so…”

“As long as it does not bother you,” Indra says, as if that is the only thing that matters.

Well, actually, for Indra it probably is.

“Not at all,” Sakura says, rubbing her thumb along his cheekbone. “Thanks for worrying though.”

“Oh we’ll never stop worrying about you, Sakura,” Ashura announces cheerfully, bounding back
“Put her down!” Indra demands, miffed at his brother’s undignified display. “She needs to sleep and we need rest as well. We have to be vigilant.”

Ashura places Sakura back in place, sticking his tongue out at his brother. “Spoilsport,” he grumbles but he dutifully pulls the covers over Sakura as Indra turns out the light.

“All right,” Ashura says, breath tickling the downy hairs on Sakura’s neck.

“All right,” says Indra, crawling back into bed.

Sakura, secure and safe between her two most precious people, whispers, “Sweet dreams.”

Kiki leaps on Sakura’s stomach letting out a long, low meow.

All is right and well with the world, at least for this moment.

Sakura adjusts the cuff of her kimono, staring at Konoha’s gates. This is an uncomfortably familiar feeling, standing outside the gates, wondering when she will see them again. (If she will see them again.)

This time, it is a bit different. She is dressed in more restrictive clothing than she is used to, a luxurious satin-weave kimono, a symbol of her status within the Haruno clan. The kimono is a deep red, decorated in cranes with wings spread in flight. The flat blades tucked within the sleeves and within holsters on her legs eases Sakura’s mind. It is strange to assume her birthright, even for playacting like this.

She is accompanied by an entourage of hired hands, individuals who have overseen the Konoha branch of the business in Sakura’s stead. They know that Sakura has business within Ame, though they do not know the specifics.

(She doubts they’d agree to travel with her if they did.)

Unfortunately, Team Seven was called away in the middle of the night for a mission of their own, something about one of Oto’s many underground cells. Sakura prays that they stay safe and well-rested on their own.

None of them have a self-preserving bone in their body.

(Not that she does either, to be honest. It seems to be a trademark of Team Seven. Perhaps Kakashi taught them all something after all. She thinks he’d be horrified if he knew they took on his habits.)

Sakura wonders how long it will be before she sees these beloved red gates once more.

“All right!”

Sakura turns and ignores Indra’s uninhibited groan.

Uchiha Shisui runs her way, a large grin prominent on his face.

“I cannot believe that my pupil was going to leave without a proper send off!” Shisui berates though it is belied by his smile. “That would just be unkind, wouldn’t it?”
“Taught by an Uchiha, hm?” Noriko, the leader of this caravan, asks, coming up beside them. Calculation lights her eyes and Sakura knows she’s considering the advantages of ties to the Uchiha clan.

Sakura wonders if she is adding this to her mental collage of facts and snippets about her. Sakura knows that she is seen as a puzzle, an enigma to her clan. Choosing to leave a life of merchanting, not easy by any means, but certainly not as hard as the shinobi lifestyle she chose. Sakura wonders if Noriko or any of the others will ever manage to solve her.

(She doubts it, considering that it is a puzzle even she cannot figure out.)

“Yep!” Shisui says, slinging an arm around Sakura’s shoulder. “We’re ablation allies!” He motions to his eye and her leg, “Makes sense right?”

“…Sure,” Noriko says, trying to keep from offending.

Sakura, however, as a veteran of Shisui’s antics, merely shoves him away and laughs. “I don’t think we agreed on that name did we?”

“Semantics,” Shisui replies, waving it off. “In any case, are you going to use that new technique we were working on?”

“I doubt it. This is a caravan trip,” Sakura says, stressing it to Shisui. “It is a bit flashy.”

“A bit—a bit flashy?” Shisui laughs. “Sakura-chan, you truly embody the Will of Fire with that technique.”

He guffaws at his own joke though Sakura remains unimpressed.

“I told you he was obnoxious,” Indra says.

“You are the one who let him become your teacher,” Ashura says, shrugging helplessly.

“Really, this is a chance for me to get to know my clan and their trade routes better,” Sakura says. “There’s little likelihood of us being accosted.”

“Good,” Shisui says, looking to Noriko with something threatening lurking in his gaze. “Because the Uchiha watch out for their own and Sakura is one of ours.”

“I am not,” Sakura says, interrupting Shisui’s threat. “I am of the Haruno clan and the Haruno clan alone. And really Shisui, this is not a conducive way to converse with people. We’ll be fine.”

“I’m just looking out for you,” Shisui replies.

“In any case, we need to leave. Are we going to part ways angrily or are we going to hug?” Sakura says.

Shisui sighs, pushing his curly hair out of his face. “Damn it, Sakura-chan, you drive a hard bargain.”

“I learned from the best,” Sakura replies.

Shisui chuckles, stepping forward and wrapping his arms around Sakura in a tight embrace that lifts her off her feet. “Be careful out there, Sakura-chan,” he murmurs in her ear. “Give ‘em hell.”

“Always do,” Sakura replies, pulling away.
Shisui smirks, chucking her under her chin. “Alright brat, I’ll see you soon. I’m looking forward to the story of this trip.”

Sakura sticks out her tongue, waving him off. “I’m not sure if I’ll be telling you about my trips anymore; not after the way you embellished the last one.”

“Everyone needs to know about their favorite Pacifist Ninja,” Shisui calls

“That’s an oxymoron,” Sakura sings back, before turning back to Noriko and the caravan.

Noriko gives the call and they set off, at a much slower pace than she’d used to.

Her heart is much lighter than it was a few moments before.

“I’ll be back, Konohagakure,” she whispers, not caring if anyone overhears her promise. “Wait for me.”

"We’ll enter tomorrow,” Noriko says, accepting the meat that Sakura passes her a plate of dinner. “Sundays are the only consistent day where there isn’t rain in Amegakure.”

Sakura nods. “That makes sense. Anything I need to know?”

Noriko looks at her, lips pursed. “Be careful not to step out of line. The shinobi of Amegakure are merciless and they are constantly watched by their Angel.”

“You mean Konan,” Sakura says, staring into the burning embers.

“Konan, Angel, whatever you’d like to call her,” Noriko says. “She’s lethal to those who threaten Ame’s peace.”

“Then it is a good thing that we’re only here to trade goods,” Sakura replies.

Noriko laughs, a rusty sound within her chest. “You may be a ninja but you’re decades too young to pull one over on me, Haruno. Good merchanting is built upon subterfuge and nonverbal communication.”

“Truly, Noriko, I intend no harm in Ame,” Sakura says, meeting Noriko’s gaze squarely. “I do have business here but I come in peace.”

Noriko squints at her for a moment, assessing, before poking the fire. “For your sake, I certainly hope so. You’re playing a game far out of your league.”

“I know,” Sakura says. “It’s why I choose to make my own rules. It’s the only way I might win.”

Noriko chuckles, slapping Sakura on the back. “You may be a Haruno yet, girl. Get some rest; we’re up at dawn.”

“Nervous?” Ashura asks as Sakura settles in for the night.

“Of course,” she replies, laying back beneath the blankets. She is the only one of the caravan who opts to sleep outside in the bracing humidity. She doesn’t mind, as long as she can see the stars. “A lot is riding on how this meeting goes.”

“You will do well,” Indra says. “We will be with you.”
“Yeah,” Sakura says, something warm nestling into her chest and bolstering her at his reminder of their steadfast presence. “I won’t be alone.”

“And we will not allow harm to come to you,” Ashura promises.

Sakura sleeps with her hands in both of theirs, waking before dawn to assist the caravan break down camp. They travel in sleepy silence toward Ame, its walls rising in a foreboding manner on all sides. Still, Sakura can see skyscrapers that stand taller than the walls. A moat of sorts, really more a lake, encompasses the walls, bracketing the village in.

“We will travel by ferry,” Noriko says, catching the way Sakura’s eyes linger. “There is only one way into village.”

Sakura stays quiet as they load onto the ferry, nerves singing with anticipation as they pass between the gates. They close behind them thunderously and Sakura fights the urge to flee. Ashura and Indra are here with her, she is not alone.

“We must present ourselves to the Angel,” Noriko says. “As the clan representative, you will go, Sakura.”

“Of course,” Sakura says, bowing to Noriko. “Thank you for everything, Noriko.”

Noriko bows in return, eyes sharp. “Don’t get yourself killed, girl.”

Sakura smiles, turning to her Ame escort. “I bear gifts for your Angel, as is customary,” she says, indicating the packages. “Please, search them and we can be on our way.”

Sakura stands through their thorough search of herself and her belongings, well-used to the treatment at this point. She carries no weapons on herself, having stripped them away the night before and hidden them outside of the village. She feels vulnerable without Sashimasu, but Sakura is far from defenseless.

“Come with me,” one of them says, snapping to the others to carry the parcels. “Our Angel is receiving merchants today at the Tower.”

Sakura walks between them, mapping out the village as they walk. The village is not expansive, rather, the area it occupies it rather small. Instead of building out, it seems that Ame builds up. All of the buildings stretch stories above Sakura, disappearing into the looming clouds. As Noriko said, there is no rain on Sundays.

They lead her to the tallest of the skyscrapers, which depicts four faces built within the very frame of the building. It is a monument similar in many ways to the one back home and Sakura wonders if Pein was inspired by his former teacher’s village. She swallows as they lead her inside.

There is no going back now; she is within the belly of the beast.

The Ame shinobi bring her into a spacious room, where a few other people wait. From the looks of them, they appear to be of the merchant class as well. At the far end of the room, Sakura sees Konan, perched upon an ornate, white chair shaped like a lily. Upon closer inspection, Sakura can tell that the chair is made of paper. In fact, the entire room, the floor, the walls, and the ceiling are lined with paper.

Sakura’s anxiety spikes as she remembers Konan’s speciality.

“You will wait in line,” one of the nin tells her, pushing the parcels back into her hands. “The
Angel will receive you when she’s ready.”

Sakura nods, watching as they leave. From what she can tell, she and Konan are the only people with honed chakra in the room. A rustle of paper and the brothers’ shouts are her only warnings before Konan is suddenly right in front of her, orange eyes appraising.

Sakura bites her tongue to keep from making a noise. Up close, Konan is beautiful: all fine features and pronounced eyes. She is twice as deadly as paper presses close to Sakura’s throat, not restricting her windpipe, but coming close.


Konan’s eyes widen slightly before narrowing as she hears Sakura’s voice. “A native of Konoha,” she says, voice husky. “How rare.” Without turning away or even raising her voice, she says, “Leave us.”

There is a shuffle as everyone files out of the room. Konan draws the paper away from Sakura’s throat, gliding back to her chair.

“Come,” she says, flicking her wrist. A chair takes shape from the papers that litter the ground, this one in the shape of a chrysanthemum. “Sit.” Sakura does so with a murmured word of thanks. “Would you care for tea?”

Sakura glances at the pure white porcelain tea set situated by Konan’s chair. “Tea would be lovely,” she replies, keeping her expression schooled and even.

Konan’s movements are measured and precise as she goes about preparing cups for both of them. She adds sugar and honey to both, before passing a cup to Sakura. Sakura splits her attention between Konan and the cup. It would be all too easy for Konan to poison her with this…

(See and Ino have created all sorts of nasty concoctions over the years that wreak all sorts of torment upon the human body. And Sakura knows better than anyone that there is no such thing as immunity to every poison.)

She meets Konan’s eyes and drinks from the cup.

Konan’s lips quirk at the corners as she too begins to sip on her tea. “I must say I am surprised that Konoha would be so bold as to send one of their shinobi within our borders,” she says mildly. “Even despite our understanding that such a thing would never happen.”

“I am here of my own accord,” Sakura replies. “I was not sent here on a mission, rather I am learning the legacy my family left me. The Haruno are merchants and it is time that I learn the craft.”

“I see,” Konan says. “And it is mere coincidence that you are the apprentice to Sarutobi Hiruzen and that you’ve traversed many of the shinobi nations yourself, then?”

“So it seems,” Sakura replies. “If I may, I fear that I shirked protocol by not presenting you with your gifts. Allow me to do so now.” She reveals a beautiful ceremonial sword, bowing over it as she passes it to Konan. “May our swords remain sheathed and never cross.” She unveils her second gift, presenting Konan with an ornate fan. “May the winds of change carry us into a new era.”

Konan takes both gifts. “May it be,” she says, something like amusement glittering in her eyes. “I notice you did not bring the traditional third gift.”
“The third gift is immaterial, but of vastly greater substance,” Sakura says, looking to the brothers in her periphery. “You have been misled. The plan to bring the Jūbi back to life will not result in peace, but in ruination.”

Konan stiffens and paper closes around Sakura’s throat. She hears the exclamations of the brothers but ignores them, keeping her gaze trained on Konan.

“I speak the truth,” Sakura manages to wheeze out before the paper constricts further.

“How did you learn our plans?” Konan demands, standing over Sakura as she falls to the ground in a kneeling position. In that moment, as the paper hovers around Konan, Sakura can see why she is called an Angel. An angel of vengeance perhaps, but certainly an angel. “Who told you?”

Sakura taps at the paper around her throat, unable to speak through the strangulation. Konan releases her, but Sakura chooses to remain on the floor, staying in a submissive posture. She wants no fight here. “No one told me,” she says, voice rasping. “You have claimed at least four of the tailed beasts. I was present for a number of attempts. When I began to read the texts on the origins of the tailed beasts, I learned of Jūbi. It was Jiraiya who told me that Akatsuki was formed to fight for world peace.”

“Jiraiya is a traitor.”

“Jiraiya is not a traitor,” Sakura replies, bowing her head. “He was caught in a very difficult decision; loyalty to his country or loyalty to the children he thought of as his own. Either way, he would betray one of his most precious people.”

“And which was better?” Konan asks. “A nation with more than enough defenders or orphaned children in the middle of a war zone?”

“Neither is necessarily better. If I were in that position…” Sakura sighs, “well, I would have tried to find a compromise; change the rules as necessary to protect my precious people.”

“That is a very naïve mindset,” Konan says.

“And your goal for world peace is not?” Sakura asks, incredulous. “As long as humans have their free will, there will always be violence and bloodshed and war.”

“That is why they won’t have free will,” Konan says.

“No free will? That’s what makes us human! Our ability to make decisions for ourselves is what defines us!” Sakura shouts, fear pulsing through her. The idea that every choice would be taken away…Sakura cannot imagine a worse fate. Sakura would rather keep her mistakes as they are, even with the consequences wrought, than have her freedom taken.

“Free will leads to fear, anger, hatred, deceit…it is mankind’s ruin,” Konan says. “We will rend this world in two and remake it in our image. The perfect image.”

“Jūbi is not the way to do so,” Sakura says, shaking her head. “Jūbi was born of Ōtsutsuki Kaguya and the God Tree from which chakra was founded. Kaguya was fueled with hatred and jealousy regarding those who used chakra. She wanted it for herself. Do you think that a creature born of such malice could truly bring about world peace? Jūbi is uncontrollable.”

“Pein can do it,” Konan says. “His gaze will guide us.”

“The Sage of Six Paths and his brother nearly died trying to subjugate Jūbi,” Sakura says. “They
couldn’t beat it. They tricked Jūbi and sealed it within the Sage, creating the first jinchūriki. I know that the answer you seek is not another jinchūriki.”

“Lies,” Konan says, stepping back from Sakura. “It cannot be.”

“Maybe,” Sakura says. “I would suggest investigating the matter yourself. Whoever it is that informed you of Jūbi and its abilities was wrong, which may mean that your goals are not as aligned as you thought they were.” Sakura stops there, knowing not to push it further.

Konan looks down at her, something vulnerable in her gaze. “Do you believe in world peace?”

“I want it, yes,” Sakura says. “However, I am not certain that peace is achievable within this lifetime. Still…”

“What is it?”

“I have a dream, just as you do. It is…well, maybe it is an impossible dream just as yours is. Mine is for halcyon days.”

“‘Halcyon days?’ What do you mean?” Konan asks.

“I’m seeking the happiness and peace of my friends; my precious people,” Sakura says. “It may be selfish, but I will do anything for it. I’ve staked my life on this dream.” Her eyes flash to her spirits. “I will die for this dream.” She turns her gaze back to Konan. “More importantly, I will live for the dream.”

“I see,” Konan murmurs before chuckling, the sound sharp and painful. “You remind me of someone; someone who has long since been lost.”

Sakura bows her head in acknowledgment, knowing she speaks of her lost teammate. Slowly, shakily, Sakura gets to her feet. “There is one last gift,” Sakura says, pulling free the chain around her neck. She tosses the ring Konan’s way. She knows this is a gambit, that she risks the lives of the jinchūriki, her friends, by returning the ring that assists in tailed beast extraction. Still, it is a risk Sakura feels she must take. “I’ve told you all that I know, from here it is on you.”

So saying, Sakura activates the seal drawn upon the bottoms of her feet (somehow inspections never seem to check there). She flickers in place for a moment and then she is gone.

Sakura appears beside the tree where she’s sealed her equipment, listing to the side. She sighs heavily, slumping into the sturdy tree. She did it. Whatever happens now happens. It is out of her hands.

She looks down, taking in the way her body trembles.

She is bombarded on both sides as the Ōtsutsuki brothers wrap themselves around her, cosseting her close.

“Don’t do that,” Indra says.

“How could you risk yourself like that?” Ashura demands, moving her collar to the side.

Blessed coolness streams into her neck as the bruises begin to fade away.

“Thank you,” Sakura says, huffing a sigh of relief. “I’m glad you were there with me.”
“Always,” they say in unison.

Sakura allows herself to be held far longer than she’d like to admit, trembling still from the encounter. She was so close to death and Sakura is unused to behaving passively in the face of such a threat. Finally, she begins to reluctantly untangle herself from the brothers, hindered by their own unwillingness to release her.

“We need to go,” she says. “We’re still too close to Ame for comfort.”

“You…you…” a new voice says.

Sakura whirls, tensing for a fight.

She is shocked by what she finds.

A…man’s head sticks out of the ground directly in front of Sakura. His skin appears to be split down the middle, black on one side and white on the other. A flytrap emerges from his shoulders.

Sakura stares into his gold eyes, completely unsure how to react to this…being.

She has, of course, seen images in the bingo books but in person he is something completely different.

Zetsu.

Self-proclaimed cannibal of the Akatsuki.

“Why are you here?” Sakura demands, clenching her fists.

“I go where I please,” he replies, eyes trained on Sakura with something akin to wonder. “You…you’re different.”

“I…I have no idea how to respond to that,” Sakura says, still in a defensive stance. “Are you planning on attacking me?”

“No,” he replies, still watching her.

Sakura nods, staring up at the man. “So why appear here now?”

“You…you’re so similar to her…your chakra…there’s something about it.” Zetsu moves closer before sharply shaking his head. “No. I was mistaken. You are not she.”

He disappears and Sakura exhales in relief.

“Well I’m glad that’s o—”

“What the hell was that?” Indra explodes, falling to his knees in front of Sakura. He pulls her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. “Why was he here?”

“Wait?” Sakura says, voice muffled. Indra does not loosen his grip, in fact, he tightens it. “Wait, you know him?”

Sakura can feel the shudder that runs through him.

“He…I remember him. He was there…before,” Indra says softly, breath rustling Sakura’s hair. “He…told me things.” He glances up, tears clear in his eyes as he stares at Ashura. “Even before
we went our separate ways he told me things…nasty things. It got worse after the isolation. At the
time, I thought he was my only friend but looking back…he drove a wedge between me and
everyone I loved.”

“Indra,” Sakura says, tears tickling at the back of her eyes.

For Indra, silence is a calculated weapon. For Ashura, it is always a weapon turned upon him.

Sakura grunts as another weight is thrown upon her, presumably Ashura’s body as he hugs them
both.

“I understand,” Ashura says roughly, choking on tears and sadness and bile. Bitter rage mauls at
his chest. This is his brother and they were driven apart by another’s design. “Indra, I am so sorry.
I’m sorry I didn’t realize, I’m sorry I didn’t try harder, I’m sorry that I killed you.” He is crying
fully, sobs wracking his body and making it hard to speak. “Indra, I love you.”

Indra curls tighter around Sakura, shaking. Still, he manages to nod. “I…I love you too Ashura. I’m
so sorry.”

Sakura hugs the brothers as hard as she can. “I love you both,” Sakura says. “Indra, Ashura, it
wasn’t your fault. You didn’t know what was happening. How could you know? You were
manipulated and coerced and…and gaslighted into doing what you did. You aren’t weak. Kami,
you two are the strongest people I have ever met. I love you so, so much.”

Indra laughs wetly and Sakura’s heart leaps at the sound. “You think I’m strong? Sakura…you are
the strongest person I’ve had the privilege of knowing. You inspire me daily.”

It is Sakura’s turn to snort. “Yeah right.”

“He’s right, Sakura-chan,” Ashura says earnestly, letting Indra go and leaning back on his heels.
“You’re a human hurricane.”

Indra sighs, letting go of Sakura and scrubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. He clears his
throat. “Anyway…that guy, he looks different than he used to.”

“What do you mean?” Sakura asks, sniffling a bit to clear her nose.

“His skin wasn’t split into two different colors,” Indra explains. “He was fully black.”

Sakura furrows her brow, trying to figure it out.

“Why was he so interested in you Sakura?” Ashura asks, concern clear in his red rimmed eyes.

Sakura shrugs. “I have as much an idea as you. Indra?”

“I do not know,” Indra says. “He recognized something about you…probably about your chakra
signature. Who it is…well, that’s anyone’s guess.”

Sakura nods, hesitates, and then leans in for another tight hug.

Indra stiffens momentarily, before melting into her embrace.

Sakura leans heavily into him, pressing her lips up against his ear. “You are not your mistakes,”
she says. “You are human and I love you regardless of any and all shortcomings.”

Sakura feels the tension drain from Indra’s shoulders at her words. He makes a small huff of
amusement at the way she holds him, as if she can carry all of his burdens. Truthfully, he thinks she probably can. (She already is.) Indra’s arms squeeze her tightly before releasing her.

“So what now?” Ashura asks.

Sakura grabs her bag once more. “We return to Konhagakure. It’s time to call a Kage Summit.”
jōnin pt. II

Chapter Notes

We're nearing the end of our adventure and it has been a wild ride for me and perhaps for you as well. Should have one more chapter and an epilogue before everything is wrapped up. Thank you to those who've been along on this romp from the beginning and those of you joining just now. Let me know what you think!

"You are certain?"

Sakura continues to hold her stance relaxed and loose, fighting off the urge to roll her eyes. She knows Homura's beady gaze will catch it and this whole thing will dissolve into even further meaningless bickering. "I am, Mitokado-sama."

He folds his hands, leaning forward, a disagreeable frown upon his face. "From your report it is apparent that at no point did Konan outright accept your claims. I am not comfortable calling for a Summit on such flimsy evidence."

"Konan of Akatsuki is a world-class shinobi trained by the man who sits opposite you," Tsunade says, an undertone of a bite in her voice as she gestures to a sheepish Jiraiya. "No self-respecting shinobi, especially not one who founded a group such as Akatsuki, would speak so bluntly with an enemy."

Sakura bites the inside of her cheek as Homura makes a reply. They've been at this for hours and it seems as if they have gotten absolutely nowhere at all.

"There is another who pulls the strings," Jiraiya says firmly. "Many of their actions since the loss of Nagato have not made sense. Initially they banded together as a group of freedom fighters; liberating Ame and restoring stability within the war-ravaged village. Their dealings with Orochimaru and Kabuto, the way they farm out mercenary jobs, and even the way they seek to antagonize Konoha and her allies are actions that do not make sense with their plans for stability."

"From your report, it appears that Konan did mention a plan to create world peace," Koharu muses, riffling through the stack of papers before her. "Any idea as to what that plan is?"

Sakura glances briefly towards Tsunade, making sure she has her approval. Tsunade nods so Sakura says, "Based on the intel we've received from our allied nations and our own experiences, it seems that Akatsuki is attempting to gather the jinchūriki."

Shikaku pulls himself out of his slouch, looking interested for the first time since the meeting began hours ago. Sakura hopes that the interest spells an end to this meeting. It has gone on far too long. "They're after the jinchūriki?"

"The information I've gathered from my sprouts tells the same story," Jiraiya says, lending credence to Sakura's words. "At least three of the jinchūriki have been captured by the Akatsuki and one of the tailed beasts was extracted from Kazekage-sama." He nods toward Sakura. "All of the remaining jinchūriki that we know of have had attempts made against them by Akatsuki."
"For what purpose do they want the tailed beasts?" Danzō asks, bracing his elbows on the table. Sakura does not like the cold interest in his eye. Danzō is a war dog through and through, restless in times of peace. Truthfully, Sakura doesn't think that he believes in peacetime. His ambition has a voracious appetite, never satisfied. It is he who runs the dark, twisting Roots that travel beneath the surface of Konoha. If he thinks he can use the jinchūriki, Sakura's friends, he has another thing coming. Sarutobi may have turned a blind eye to his former comrade-in-arms, but Sakura is not willing to do the same.

Sakura looks askance at Ashura and Indra, catching the contempt in their expressions as they regard Danzō. They nod at her though, in encouragement.

"This is just conjecture at this point," Sakura begins, unwilling to reveal her connection to the Ōtsutsuki brothers before the Council. They are too calculating, too ready to take advantage. She will not allow them to try to use the Ōtsutsuki brothers, though she doubts that the Council truly can. "However, there is lore from every nation over that states that the nine tailed beasts were once one; the ten-tails, Jūbi. A beast of unimaginable power born of Ōtsutsuki Kaguya's rage against her sons."

"A fairytale," Homura scoffs, glancing away from her dismissively.

"A fairytale perhaps, but a fairytale that Akatsuki believes," Sakura counters. "They want to use extract the tailed beasts and create Jūbi. Akatsuki wants to use Jūbi to rule the world; impose their will upon everyone else and force their idea of peace across the world."

"That's all well and good, but what does that matter for Konoha?" Shikaku says, crossing his arms. "You called together the Cabinet for a reason, Tsunade-sama; what gambit are you planning?"

Tsunade smiles wryly, shaking her head. "There's a reason you're our Jōnin Commander, Shikaku. Based on this information and the imminent threat that Akatsuki continues to pose to us, I have come to the decision that we must call a Kage Summit."

"A Kage Summit has not been called since Hashirama-sama's reign," Koharu murmurs. "Is it truly so serious?"

"Just like that first Summit, we are dealing with a threat to all of our livelihoods. And, just like that Summit, we deal again with an issue related to the jinchūriki," Tsunade says. "Hashirama-oji knew the wisdom in splitting the jinchūriki up among the nations. He may have seen the truth within the story of Jūbi. This time, we must discuss how to keep the remaining jinchūriki safe and how to deal with the increasing threats of Akatsuki and Oto."

"And what of Iwa?" Danzō says. "We know that they have a standing agreement with Oto, however informal it may be. They were more than antagonistic to our…diplomats when they visited." His lips twist as he looks at Sakura. Sakura thinks it might be in amusement. She regards him coolly in return, knowing that he does not care for her. As the apprentice to Sarutobi, Sakura is a representation of everything Danzō detests. "Considering that they were imprisoned under false pretenses, I doubt Ōnoki will be open to discussion."

"If Iwa chooses not to attend, then that is upon them," Tsunade replies. "I've exchanged missives with our allies regarding some of the jinchūriki situation, before Akatsuki's plans came to light. I know that Kiri, Suna, and Kumo will answer the call. I doubt that Iwa will pass up this opportunity. Ōnoki is too vain and paranoid to allow a meeting among the great nations without attending himself. He'll think we're planning an attack on Iwa otherwise."
"The call for a Summit is solid," Shikaku says. "I cast my vote in favor of calling the Summit."

"As do I," Jiraiya says.

"Aye," Koharu says.

"Yes," Homura adds.

"Let us move forward with the call," Danzō says, a note of finality in his voice.

Sakura does not care for the greedy look in his eye. Doubtless, he will begin to look into Jūbi himself and begin to explore its resurrection. Thankfully though, he will not have a say at the actual Summit; it will be in Tsunade's hands. And Sakura trusts Tsunade with her life and, perhaps more importantly, with the fate of Konoha.

Tsunade nods, bracing her hands on the table as she stands. "I will send missives to Iron and the shinobi nations to call for the Summit. Let's get moving people; we need to prepare."

Sakura fidgets with the tail of her braid, unable to hide her nervousness. She hasn't done this before, revealed her secret on this sort of scale. And now she stands before a small but powerful group of people who, if they do not believe her, could make her life a misery.

Not to mention the fact that these are her most precious people within Konoha.

If they turn their backs on her...well, Sakura isn't sure what she'll do.

She slaps a no-sound seal on the door, just to be safe, ignoring the way Karin's eyebrows hike high. She knows just high level this particular seal is. She helped create it.

"We're in the Hokage Tower," Karin says, eyes warm with affectionate amusement. "Calm the paranoia."

"She's a shinobi," Kakashi says with a shrug. "It's in her blood."

"Takes after her teacher that way," Shisui mutters, only to yelp when Mikoto elbows him.

"Go on dear," Mikoto says encouragingly.

"Right," Sakura says, taking a deep, bracing breath. "Well...there is something that I've been keeping a secret for a long time now. A few people already know the truth; I informed Hiruzen-sensei, Ino, Sasuke, and Naruto in earlier years and Tsunade-sama more recently...but I've kept it hidden from everyone else for fear of appearing insane." She can feel the way that the focus on her sharpens and she closes her eyes for fear of the judgment she'll see upon their faces. "I...well, I see dead people. That is, I see the spirits of two specific shinobi: Ōtsutsuki Ashura and Indra."

"The grandsons of the first chakra user?" Shino asks, tone cool and calm, unreadable.

"The legends?" Kiba yelps, much more readable than his teammate.

"Yes," Sakura says with a nod. "In the beginning, when we were in the Academy, they were attached to my teammates, Sasuke and Naruto. As time went on, their power grew and they were able to follow me separately. They are able to interact with the physical world sometimes. Their power continues to grow, in ways that I do not yet understand. I think...I think, given time, they'll be visible to others."
"So the Forest of Death…" Shikamaru says, eyes thoughtful and calculating as he thinks back on their rather auspicious exams. The fact that they survived a blindsiding attack from Orochimaru, one of the original Sannin, makes much more sense. "They saved you…saved us."

Sakura nods firmly. "They're on our side. They've been assisting Konoha from the very start. It started with them teaching me simple katas, which I shared in turn with my fellow genin at the time." Naruto lets out a cheer, only to be shushed by Karin and Sasuke at the same time. "As Shikamaru has already said, they held Orochimaru at bay long enough for reinforcements to arrive. They are the ones who kept me alive after..." She trails off, looking to Hiruzen whose expression is a mix of contrition and embarrassment. "Well...they kept me alive."

"Why tell us now?" Itachi asks, expression purposefully blank. Sakura thinks he may be upset with her, though she isn't completely certain. "You've kept it secret for over a decade; why reveal this information to us now?"

Sakura swallows, throat suddenly dry at the responsibility laid before her. She glances askance at Tsunade who only nods, leaving the floor to her. "I have recently returned from a reconnaissance mission in Amegakure." She pauses, allowing them a moment to clamor over that, though she notes that Tenten does not seem surprised. Considering her apprenticeship with Tsunade, Tenten is probably more informed than Sakura herself is. "I encountered Konan of Akatsuki and solidified a few of my suspicions."

Sakura holds up a hand to stall any forthcoming questions. "It is not my place to say what those suspicions are. You can direct any questions you have about that to Tsunade-sama." Tsunade raises a brow, smirking at everyone who glances at her askance. "As you all know, Konoha will be attending a Kage Summit regarding the threats posed by Oto and Akatsuki. We're faced with uncertain, turbulent times. I thought it was high past time for me to reveal my secret to those I trust, which is why you are all in this room with me today." She smiles slightly. "And we need any and every advantage at our disposal. I believe having the Ōtsutsuki brothers on our side is quite the advantage. Especially since they will be a surprise to any of our enemies."

Kakashi snorts, but doesn't speak.

Tsunade stands, moving beside Sakura. "That concludes our meeting. It should go without saying, but do not repeat this information without Sakura's permission or mine." Her eyes go flinty as she cracks her knuckles. "You'll have to deal with me if I hear of loose lips. Any questions you have can be asked of Sakura on your own time; we have a lot of work yet to do. Dismissed!"

Sakura braces for the deluge of questions as her friends and family pour in around her. And, sure enough, they do not disappoint. She fields their questions, laughing with Indra and Ashura at some of the stranger questions.

She feels light, free. It is wonderful to shed the burden of her secret, at least among her trusted friends. She didn't realize the weight of it until it was gone, shared and shouldered now among her friends.

It feels good.

Sakura kneels, brushing the debris from the top of the monument. It is a small thing and Sakura remembers back to the bell test when Naruto announced his desire to see his name up there one day. She doubts that everyone who fell in the name of Konoha is engraved into the obsidian.

The Memorial Stone.
Her eyes trace along the different names, ignoring the drizzle that falls and frizzes up her hair. She bows her head, saying a silent word of thanks to both the sung and unsung heroes. Then, she removes a scroll from her pack, unsealing it. A couple of polished rocks tumble free and she gathers them in hand, situating them before the Memorial Stone.

Haku.

Mitsubachi.

Nagato.

The lost and sacrificed.

But now, unforgotten and commemorated.

She runs her fingertips along the letters of Haku's name, sighing heavily. Yesterday she was told that she would be joining Tsunade's caravan to the Summit as its main speaker. Sakura supposes she understands the reasoning behind it, as she has encountered and built relations among the different villages. She's also the one who gathered the intel on Akatsuki's motives firsthand and she guesses that her account will lend credence to Konoha's position.

She's worried. Sakura knows that tensions are continuing to mount ever higher, she's read her sprouts' reports. It's all about to come to a head, boil over, and Sakura has a sinking sensation that she will be caught in the middle of it.

Considering the players in the game, Sakura doubts she'll emerge unscathed.

Hands press down on her shoulders, lifting her out of her thoughts. She doesn't move, letting their presence wash over and center her.

"What are you contemplating, Sakura-chan?" Ashura asks, rubbing small circles into her left shoulder.

"Seems to be some heavy thoughts," Indra adds, squeezing her right shoulder.

"Sharing them might help," Ashura presses.

Sakura sighs again, staring blindly at the Memorial. "Is it worth this?" she asks.

"Which part?" Indra replies.

"All this wanton war and sacrifice," she says, struggling to find the words for her thoughts. "Haku died for his precious person, a man who didn't see his worth until after Haku threw himself into the line of fire. If we hadn't been there, if we didn't bury them ourselves, they would have been thrown into the ditches with the rest and burned like litter.

"Mitsubachi…" Sakura trails off, breath going ragged. "Mitsubachi died dishonored and alone; buried in an abyss when she should have received the proper Iwa sky burial. She'll be redacted from all of Iwa's reports and all of the Kamizuru clan's records." She picks up the rock, as close to the rocks of Scorpion Canyon as she could find, and grimaces. "This is quite possibly the only written record of Mitsubachi. Is this all she will be remembered as? A pebble scrawled with her name? When I am gone, who will remember her? Who will tell her story?

"I never met Nagato, hell, I haven't a clue of what he looked like or what type of person he was. All I know is that he was taught by Jiraiya-sama and that he grew up alongside Konan and Yahiko
in a war torn Amegakure." She touches the smooth stone with his name on it, warming it against her palm. "His death solidified their hatred of Konoha; it was the catalyst for the vendetta they wage against us. They've spent years nursing this anger, returning his death with scores more deaths of people who go unmourned and forgotten. Is this what he would have wanted? Would he want a war waged in his name? I can't claim to know anything of his character, but who would want blood to be shed as their funeral offering? It all just seems so...pointless."

"Death is a difficult beast," Indra says. "It is the final frontier, the last mission."

"For most," Ashura interrupts. "Not for the two of us."

Indra rolls his eyes. "For most people," he says in reluctant agreement. "Death is the end of a person on this plane of existence for the most part. What care have they for what happens to their physical bodies thereafter? There is something that happens after..." He pauses, furrowing his brow. Sakura turns his way. "I can't seem to remember what it was, but there was something."

"Death is a burden for the living, not for the dead," Ashura says, voice gentle. "The way they continue to exist in this plane is in what you are doing right now, honoring them like this. They live on and even take on new life in memories and in the stories you tell of them. You do them justice in this, including them along the Memorial Stone."

"They weren't of Konoha," Sakura says, thinking specifically of Haku and Mitsubachi, "but they were my people."

"And so they continue to be," Indra says. "Death does not end that."

Sakura sits quietly for a time, heedless of the way that the rain picks up and washes her through to the bone. The brothers stay with her, concerned but patient. She will speak when she is ready.

"How will I be remembered? How will my death be used?" she asks, not really expecting an answer.

"How do you think you'll be remembered?" Indra asks, lobbing the question back at her. "Think about your relationships, about your friends. Do you think they would use your death as a platform for their agenda?"

"No," Sakura says, "but I don't think Konan and Yahiko intend to use his death as a platform. They're trying to honor his memory." She looks between them, crossing her arms. "You talk a big game but if I were to die and you knew who was responsible, what would you do?"

"Hunt them down, destroy them, and raze their land to the ground," Ashura says simply.

Sakura raises a brow at Indra, ignoring the darkness of Ashura's threat for the time being. She's trying to make a point.

Indra huffs, face flushing. "We would do what we could to avenge you."

"As you said, death is the burden for the living." Sakura shuts her eyes for a moment before tilting her face up in welcome to the storm that brewed out of the drizzle. "I suppose it's just another thing I'll have to shoulder until one day I don't." She lets the rain wash over her as she stands. Sakura stares at the monument and her three pebbles for a long moment before turning with a smile toward the brothers. "I'll have you two along to help with the burden of living."

"Of course," Indra says.
"Without a doubt," Ashura replies.

Sakura walks through the village, impressed by the flurry of motion around her. Tsunade wasn't kidding about the preparations. Everyone, from elite clansman to craftsman to civilian, is involved in the prep work. She moves among the large metal cannisters being gathered in piles, frowning in contemplation.

She doesn't care for the fact that the mines are on display in the village so blatantly.

"Sakura!" Tenten calls. On each shoulder, she balances a metal cannister. "Right on time as always."

"Tenten," Sakura greets, lifting a cannister of her own with a grunt. She follows as Tenten leads her away from the bustling activity. "You ready to leave?"

"I am," Tenten says. "All my scrolls are packed with everything I might need. Tsunade-sama is procrastinating."

"This is doubtless a busy time for her," Sakura says. It has been a headache preparing all the loose ends for her own imminent departure. Sakura cannot imagine how much harder preparing an entire nation must be.

"I don't think that is the main issue," Tenten says, glancing around furtively. "This will be the first time Tsunade-sama has left Konoha since her inauguration and I think she's nervous."

"Nervous?" Sakura asks with a thoughtful frown. "What cause has she to be nervous?"

Tenten hums, juggling the mines absently. Sakura tenses, despite knowing that the mines are currently sealed. She watches Tenten from the corner of her eye, impressed by the casual strength on display.

"She fears returning to old habits," Tenten says. "She fears regressing. Tsunade-sama doubts her strength."

"But you do not," Sakura observes.

Tenten's smile is a flash of teeth. "No, I do not. I find that people doubt themselves most of all. And why not? They've lived through all of their weakest and lowest moments. However they tend to overlook the moments of their greatest strengths." She casts Sakura a droll look. "You share that in common."

Sakura snorts, but she does not disagree. There's no use arguing the point with Tenten, at least in this matter. Her attention shifts to a number of holes spread out before them. Sakura stops, placing her mine gingerly to the ground.

"Is this the place?" she asks.

Tenten nods. "We're still in the early stages of planting the mines," she says. "We're starting here in the main road, but we will soon shift our attention to the forest." She sets both of hers down, rapping one of them with her knuckles. "Strange aren't they?"

Mines are new to Konoha and certainly new to Sakura outside of theory. While reading Mito's accounts, Sakura, Karin, and Naruto stumbled across detailed descriptions and depictions of the defenses mounted by Uzushio, the foremost of which were land mines that could be activated with
complex fūinjutsu. While the journals did not provide exact schematics of mines, the combined knowledge and innovation of the Uzumaki, Nara, Tenten, and Genma managed to produce a land mine unique to Konoha.

Sakura stayed far away from the production. She was wary of losing yet more limbs. One is quite enough, thanks.

"They are," Sakura replies, examining the strokes of the seal on the side of her mine. The boldness of the line work screams of Karin; she possesses a flare that no one can replicate. Plus, Naruto did not receive the best tutelage for his penmanship until later in life. Sakura tamps down the flash of anger she feels at the reminder of the neglect Naruto was treated to growing up. "Let's get these buried. Seal side up; it'll be more effective that way."

Tenten assists her in getting the mine into the ground, companionable silence hanging between them. They make quick work of the mines in this way and, task done, Sakura hefts a shovel left by one of the holes to start filling in the hole.

Sakura enjoys this kind of manual labor, so different from the courts of intrigue she finds herself tangled in these days. It is nice not to think, to just do and feel the pull and stretch of her muscles. She is quite used to this sort of work, spending at least one afternoon a week shoulder-to-shoulder with Sarutobi-sensei tilling the gardens.

Sakura begins to hum the tune to a lively Fire ballad, one that gets bandied around bawdy bars after a few too many drinks. She grins as Tenten adds her own hum, making it a duet. They continue this way, one slightly off tune song transitioning to another until they are done.

Sakura wipes the sweat from her forehead and speaks a mild curse against the humidity. Tenten laughs, crouching and placing a hand against the loamy earth. Sakura does the same, calling chakra to her fingertips and channeling it into the earth.

Sakura's senses weave beyond the mine, seeking out a network of roots. It is a simple enough matter to channel her chakra through the system, so similar yet alien in comparison to her chakra coils. All living things possess chakra, possess life, though few reach the potential of shinobi. Plants, with the little chakra they have, make for fantastic vessels for chakra.

It was the Ōtsutsuki brothers who first mentioned the possibility, a technique learned from their mother that apparently fell into antiquity after they died.

Ino, in particular, is excited for the potential of the technique.

For now, Sakura calls on the plants, accelerating their growth and extending their root system to encompass the mine. When she opens her eyes, the ground where the mine is planted looks no different from the rest of the path.

"That looks good," Tenten says, still kneeling beside hers.

Sakura moves to the third mine, sending her chakra out through the ground. She pauses, frowning as a sort of pulse ripples across her chakra net in response. She delves deeper, stretching her chakra out even further, ignoring the nigiling thought that Indra will be pissed and Ashura will be upset. It reaches out, away from Konoha, further down the road. Her chakra web grows thinner and thinner, taut as she strains her chakra.

The pulse skitters across her awareness and she gasps, snapping back to herself. Sakura stands and staggers slightly, pale.
"What happened?" Tenten demands, at her side immediately and scanning her for injuries. "You overextended yourself."

Sakura allows Tenten to place her into a seated position, eyes still wide. She did not predict this. Sakura places her thumb in her mouth, biting down hard. Blood wells and Sakura slams it to the ground.

A purple grizzly bear appears.

"Murasaki, message for Tsunade-sama," Sakura says, eyes focused on the empty road. He is approaching. "Known Akatsuki member, Hoshigaki Kisame, approaching Konoha. Does not seem actively malicious. I have encountered him in the past on semi-friendly terms so I will engage and assess. I will send further word as soon as I am able."

Murasaki nods, disappearing in a plume of smoke.

"Sakura," Tenten says, giving her a hard look. "I cannot allow you to go alone."

"I don't know how he'll react to anyone else with me," Sakura replies, leaving out the uncertainty she feels over how he'll react to her. "I've encountered him on a handful of occasions and came out unscathed. He reached out toward my chakra specifically. We're...friendly."

"You don't sound sure of that," Tenten says, gripping Sakura's shoulder.

"Send Katsuyu," Sakura says, knowing Tenten will not budge. "She can report to you and alert you if I need assistance."

"I don't like this," Tenten says, eyes stormy.

"I know. I need you to trust me."

Sakura holds Tenten's gaze, allotting precious seconds to awaiting her decision.

She does not have to wait long.

"Fine," Tenten growls, summoning two of Katsuyu. She passes one to Sakura who perches Katsuyu upon her shoulder. "Be safe."

Sakura gives her a look of confidence that she doesn't really feel and sprints off down the road. The closer she gets, the more she can feel the weight of his chakra, thick and heavy, a guiding beacon. She isn't all that surprised when she hears: "Are you crazy?"

Ashura.

"Not quite. She's certainly reckless and foolhardy though. Perhaps she could even be considered foolish if she continues moving forward with this slipshod plan."

Indra.

Sakura surmises that her mounting anxiety alerted them and it is little more than a matter of a thought for them to anchor to her.

"It's risky," Sakura admits. "But if his intentions are ill, I can keep him distracted until help arrives."

"Sakura, dear, his skill vastly outclasses yours," Indra says, brutally honest.
"I am well aware," Sakura replies, the barest hint of a waver in her voice. "But I amuse him."

"Will that be enough?" Ashura asks.

Sakura does not, cannot, respond as she finally sees him.

Hoshigaki Kisame.

He walks sedately, seemingly unconcerned about the fact that he is a missing nin deep in enemy territory. His eyes light up when he sees her.

"I thought it was you," Kisame says, grin wide and dangerous.

Sakura returns his smile hesitantly. She feels awkward and off-balanced, unsure of his intentions. "Why are you here?" she asks, knowing that she is rude, that she runs the risk of offending. She cannot bring herself to care; Konoha's safety is her priority.

He laughs, thankfully amused. "You're short-tempered when you're uncomfortable," he says, moving closer. "I came to continue our conversation."

"And which conversation is that?" Sakura asks, keenly aware of their last conversation, the gamble she took in Suna. She eyes his gear with a thoughtful mein. "I see you forewent your Akatsuki cloak."

"For today and all others that follow," Kisame says, smile dropping away into a frown. "I took your advice upon our last visit and came upon a den of snakes."

"You confronted Orochimaru and Kabuto?" Sakura asks, scanning him for injuries. There are none. "Alone?"

"I went into the situation prepared, thanks to you and your words," Kisame says. "It was as you said. Kabuto attempts to serve two masters, though it is apparent that his true loyalties lie with Orochimaru. He was passing sensitive information to Orochimaru when I came upon them. They seek to use Akatsuki as a tool for their own ends." He snorts derisively. "Little good that it does them now."

"What do you mean?" Sakura asks, reeling from the overload of information. Respect, admiration, and a trace of envy thrum through her veins as she considers the man before her. He single-handedly confronted the two men who most haunt her nightmares with nary a scratch left on him by the encounter. "What did you do?"

The smile he gives her is predatory. "I taught them a lesson they won't soon forget, Kabuto especially. I do not take kindly to betrayal."

"And yet you are here." Sakura swallows against her suddenly dry throat, astonished at her own boldness. She avoids looking at Ashura and Indra. "Isn't this a betrayal to Akatsuki?"

"Akatsuki disbanded," Kisame says simply, as if he is merely discussing the weather.

Sakura blinks at his casual tone. This decision will have astronomical consequences. World changing consequences. She is staggered by all of the implications, but Kisame continues.

"My time with Akatsuki has come to an end," Kisame says. "As I tried to determine what to do next, I overheard something interesting: there is to be a Kage Summit, the first since the founding of the nations. Imagine my lack of surprise when I discovered who initially called it."
Sakura flushes at the inadvertent compliment. "So you decided to come here?"

Kisame shrugs. "Might as well, right? I thought you might vouch for me before the Mizukage. You assisted in the treaty between Kiri and Konoha; you have a voice before both parties." Kisame gives her a smug smirk. "I do happen to have some leverage."

"Leverage?" Sakura repeats, trying to appear disinterested. She doesn't quite think she succeeds. "What kind of leverage?"

Kisame rifles in a pocket. Sakura ignores the stifled exclamations from Ashura and Indra. She trusts Kisame enough not to attack her at this point.

He pulls something free with a flourish. He presents it to her in an open palm.

Two bulky, though seemingly innocuous, rings sit in his huge hand, tiny by comparison.

Akatsuki rings.

"Two?" Sakura asks with a forced casualness. If her theory is accurate, this alone may foil the unknown Akatsuki leader's plan to resurrect the Jūbi. "Not one?"

Kisame's smile is a ruthless and bloodthirsty thing. "Blood for blood. Kabuto betrayed me, I took his hand." He pauses, reminiscing. "And his leg." He nods toward her with an oddly soft look. "I thought it only fitting."

Sakura's lip wobbles for a moment before firming. "That may be the sweetest thing a person's ever done for me."

It may be strange, it may be morbid, but it's certainly a fitting gift for a shinobi.

"I could give you a better gift," Ashura protests.

Sakura can tell by the look on his face that Indra is pouting.

She restrains herself from rolling her eyes. The brothers are far too sensitive.

"So?" Kisame asks.

Sakura feels the shift of Katsuyu's eye stalks as Kisame presses the weight of the rings into her hand.

She grins, running high on relief and adrenaline. "Let me handle the introductions."

Sakura stares down at her pack, going through her inventory one more time. All of her shinobi tools are sealed, ready to be outfitted to her arms in sleeves of tattoos. Living with a few fūinjutsu specialists has its perks.

"Am I missing anything?" Sakura asks, glancing over at her companions.

"Of course not Sakura-chan," Ashura says, pressing a hand against her shoulder. "You keep at least two go-packs prepped at all times, even when you're out of the village. You have everything you need."

Sakura nods, drawing some of her loose hair over her shoulder to fidget with it. She isn't used to it down, but she cannot say she dislikes it.
"What's truly bothering you?" Indra asks, peeking an eye open. He sits on the floor in a meditative stance. "You don't usually get like this prior to missions."

"This is no usual mission," Sakura replies, biting into her lip as she tries to put words to the fears that have plagued her since Ame. "Everything is coming to a head. The Kages are coming together for the first time since the Shodai Hokage. All of our work—Sarutobi-sensei's and mine—will come to light, for better or for worse. I trust our relations with Suna and Kiri will hold strong and be of invaluable assistance in what is to come, but I am unsure if the same will be true of Kumo. Our attempts in Iwa definitely worsened relations. I have no idea how the Tsuchikage will respond to my presence."

Sakura frowns, realizing that she's tugging sharply at her hair. She releases it and fists her hands at her side.

Ashura and Indra exchange wordless looks and then Ashura is crowding into Sakura's space, pushing her toward Indra. Indra reaches out, catching her hands and drawing her gently down into the comfort of his embrace. He turns her as he does so, shifting her until her back is pressed to his chest and she is enveloped in his cool, calming presence.

Sakura exhales deeply, body shuddering with the force of it before she goes lax and limp against Indra. She closes her eyes, inhaling his woody scent as Ashura sits down across from her and takes up one of her hands, massaging the tendons of her left hand until it uncurls from its bunched state and goes pliant beneath him.

"Don't think I didn't see what you both did," Sakura says softly. "You know I don't like being handled."

"Of course, Sakura," they chime, varying degrees of amusement in their tones.

"However, since it is indicative of your growing teamwork, I'll allow it," Sakura says, sighing happily as Ashura pushes into a particularly hard muscle.

"It has nothing to do with the fact that we've made you very comfortable," Indra says, huffing against her ear.

"Nothing at all," Sakura says, wiggling her toes. Her thoughts return to the initial conversation and she straightens slightly. "The thing is, while all of our dealings are coming to light, so to will the mysterious Akatsuki leader's. We know bits and pieces of the plan; there's no doubt that this leader has heard of the Kage Summit. All of the major players will be gathered together in one place. Just as we go to plea our side of things, I cannot help but think that this leader will show his hand there."

"Most likely," Ashura says, meeting her gaze with a solemnness that he rarely wears. "Everything is culminating in this Kage Summit. I cannot promise what the outcome will be, but I swear to be by you through whatever comes our way."

"And I second that," Indra says. "We won't let you face this alone. We'll do this, whatever this Kage Summit calls for, together."

Sakura nods, nestling her head against the crook of Indra's neck. She stares at his wild hair as it pools together with hers, black and pink strands melding into one. It's a mess, not even a particularly attractive one, but something about it grounds the promises Indra and Ashura just pledged.
She believes them.

Still, it does not quell the anxiety that grows within her, festering in all of her doubts.

"Could you sing to me?" Sakura asks quietly, faintly remembering the sound of humming as her world went up in flames scant years ago. When she lost her leg and gained their voices, there was a moment where, as she slumped across Natsu's back and hung in the twilight zone between life and death, there was a song. One that she clung to without knowing why. It rooted her in the worst experience of her life and she hopes it can root her now. "It's silly but—"

Indra's chest vibrates against her back as he begins to hum, a haunting tune that immediately transports Sakura to the innumerable campfires where they told her stories. Those countless moments are precious to Sakura, time spent in the wilds where she felt overwhelmingly safe and secure.

The unending well of anxiety within her eases and, when Ashura's rumbling voice takes up the words of the verse, ebbs away completely.

It is by no means a true solution to the problems that they are bound to encounter ahead, but it is more than enough for her right now.

Sakura listens intently, letting go of her worries. When they begin to repeat the first verse, Sakura's high voice joins theirs, blending into a harmony.

"Sakura—" Karin says, voice rising in anxiety.

"I know," Sakura says around a suddenly dry throat. "It's…not good."

She passes her fingers over the slubs in the fabric once more, hoping, praying that her initial read-through is wrong.

It is not.

Sakura closes her eyes against the memories that assault her, the paralyzing, overwhelming fear. The absolute hopelessness. Orochimaru is on the move.

"We knew this was coming," Sakura says, more to comfort herself than Karin. She is still caught in the throes of the worst pain she's yet to experience in her life. Sakura shakes herself free of the darkness, turning to Karin and catching her hand. She can see the way Karin pales and shakes with memories all her own. Sakura's had her scrapes with Orochimaru, but Karin was subjected to him over a much longer period of time. He may have taken Sakura's leg, but he took Karin's freedom, at least for a time. "We'll be prepared. Tayuya is making sure of that."

"It's just so soon," Karin whispers, the whites of her eyes stark against her red pupils. "I'm not ready."

"I don't know if we'll ever be ready," Sakura replies, squeezing Karin's hand. She scoots closer but doesn't put an arm around Karin. She knows from experience that, when caught in her memories of the past, Karin doesn't do well with a lot of physical contact. It reminds her too much of being pinned and bitten against her will, her kekkei genkai ruthlessly ripped from her. "At least, we'll never think we are. But Karin, you're so strong. He'll never take you again. You won't let him. I won't let him." She giggles slightly as a thought strikes her. "Naruto won't let him."

Naruto is dedicated to his family, both those by blood and by bond. He is incredibly protective of
his cousin.

Karin smiles wanly. It isn't much, but, considering Tayuya's message, it is more than Sakura expected.

"There are coordinates here," Sakura says gently. "For four of his major lairs. One of them is a prison where he keeps the dangerous and uncooperative individuals; Tayuya thinks they can be freed when Orochimaru and Kabuto strike."

"They're going to the Kage Summit," Karin says, looking up at Sakura. "They're coming after you."

Sakura shifts slightly beneath the weight of concern in her eyes. "I doubt that I'm their target. At least, not their main one. There will be much bigger threats for them to concern themselves with. Though I have no doubt that they'll be more than happy to catch me in the crossfire."

Sakura shivers and, through their shared contact, Karin feels it. Her eyes narrow. "You shouldn't go to the Kage Summit. They can't force you to go there. Once we tell them of the threat—"

"I must," Sakura says, stalwart and resolute even through her fear. "You know I must. I have to let the Kages know of the danger posed to their jinchūriki. And since Tayuya was able to get this information to us, we can all be on guard from an attack." She frowns down at the simple kimono sent to them by Tayuya, eying the nearly invisible slubs. "Tayuya wasn't told Orochimaru's plans for the Summit; he's too paranoid to share, even with his generals."

Karin nods, gaze down and clouded as she thinks. Sakura leaves her be, just holding her hand and waiting. Finally, Karin raises her head and meets Sakura's eyes, the characteristic stubbornness of the Uzumaki shining there. "I'm going to go to the prison."

"Yeah?" Sakura says, trying to prompt Karin to continue.

"Yeah," Karin replies. "I can't go with you to the Summit; I'm not a part of Tsunade-sama's retinue. I can't be there to protect you." She exhales shakily. "So I'll go where I'll be useful. I've been Orochimaru's prisoner; I'll be able to help those that he's harmed. I can talk to them, understand them in a way that others from Konoha can't—"

"You are so, so brave," Sakura says when Karin cuts herself off. "You have survived so much and your heart is big enough to want to assist other survivors. I admire you."

Karin releases Sakura's hand, flinging her arms around Sakura's neck instead. "I wish I could go with you."

"I know," Sakura says. "I want you there too. But you'll do so much good for the survivors of Oto."

"Yeah," Karin says wetly, as tears begin to dampen Sakura's shoulder. "I know."

"Let's take this to Tsunade-sama. She needs to know."

Sakura doesn't go to move until Karin shifts away from her. Karin accepts her help to stand and slings an arm across Sakura's shoulders. Then, she giggles.

"What is it?" Sakura asks, folding the kimono across her arm.

"What do you want to bet that Team Seven will be deployed to the prison?" Karin asks.
Sakura laughs, leaning into Karin's touch as they head out the door. "That's a fool's bet."

Sakura squints out past Konoha's bright red gates, watching until the figures disappear from her vision completely. She isn't quite sure how she feels; left behind by the team of her genin days. She has not been a genin in years and Team Seven is no longer hers. It hasn't been since she stepped out of Konoha's gates with Sarutobi-sensei. That is the cost of apprenticeship, it has both its upsides and its downsides.

It is now Sai and Karin's team, even Yamato's team and Sakura does not resent the changes though they leave her feeling bereft in moments like this. Where does she belong? Where does she fit? She no longer fits perfectly into the space left her in Konoha. She's grown beyond its borders, embracing and being embraced in turn by the cultures of Suna, Kiri, Kumo, and even Iwa. She's a pastiche of details garnered the world over and it leaves her unable to fit into any of those places perfectly.

"Sakura."

Sakura jumps slightly, turning to look at her companion. "Hinata!" she greets, embracing the girl loosely with one arm. "How are you?"

"I am well," Hinata replies, pushing an errant piece of hair behind her ear.

"I like the haircut; it suits you."

And indeed it does. Hinata, whose hair was once down to the small of her back, wears her hair in a stylish bob, reminiscent of their genin days.

Hinata smiles, a touch of confidence lighting her dimples. "It was time for something new. I feel much lighter now."

Sakura knows she isn't just speaking of the haircut. "I'm glad to hear it!"

Hinata meets her gaze squarely, wearing a sense of peace that Sakura's never seen on her. "I refuse to bow my head any longer. It isn't fair to me or those around me. I cannot be a burden; I am the master of my own fate."

Hinata turns, showcasing the seal at the top of her spine. It is artfully done, looking more like a tattoo than anything else. It is shaped like a lotus in a pale blue ink. The new haircut and the cut of her top display the entirety of the seal proudly.

"My eyes are my own," Hinata says. "They cannot be taken from me, not by the greed of strangers or my own relatives." She casts Sakura a smile. "Naruto and Karin finished it before they left. A going away gift of sorts."

"That's amazing!" Sakura says, throwing her arms around Hinata and lifting her clear off her feet in celebration. Hinata squeaks before beginning to laugh. "Congratulations!"

"This marks the first day of my separation from the Hyūga," Hinata says, satisfaction radiating through her. "Call me Jiyū Hinata."

"Jiyū," Sakura says, rolling the syllables around in contemplation. She nods "Freedom. That's fair."

Hinata nods. "The reason the seal took so long is that I was learning the fūinjutsu involved to create the seal myself. When this whole mess is sorted, after the Kage Summit, I'm going to petition the
Hokage."

"Petition her?" Sakura repeats.

"For the right to unseal the branch members of the Hyūga. It is not right for them to be constrained and bound the way they are to the main family. Konoha does not condone slavery and yet we allow so many to be forced into a position of subservience for what? Tradition?" She scoffs. "It may have been allowed during the Third’s rule, but I do not think Tsunade-sama will continue to abide it once things settle."

Sakura whistles, blown away by Hinata’s resolution. The clans of Konoha haven’t dealt with an upset like this in generations. "Will Tsunade-sama be able to interfere with clan politics in such a way?"

"Hanabi is the new heir and she does not care for the way that the branch family is treated either," Hinata says. "There are no others in line for head of the clan." Her lips twist. "Father—Hiashi had his heir and the spare. With my removal from the clan, he has no spare. Hanabi will petition Tsunade-sama for the rights of the branch family. With an heir’s backing, Tsunade-sama will be able to intercede more than she would have prior."

"Neji will be freed of the burden of his fate. We can start a new family, a new clan of equals—" Hinata shrugs. "—or not. I will leave it up to Neji. He can stay a Hyūga, become a Jiyū, or anything else he wants to be. No matter what, he'll be his own person, his own Neji."

Sakura takes Hinata’s hand, looking down at the heads upon which she stands. She has looked up to these Hokages from childhood, but how did they allow the main family of the Hyūga to rule over the branch so mercilessly? Why did they allow it to continue for years? She knows the fallibility of Kages, knows it intimately from the loss of her limb on Sarutobi-sensei’s behalf, but she cannot accept such callous disregard for life.

"That’s a fantastic goal," Sakura whispers. "It’s the type of change we need."

Hinata grins back at her, squeezing her hand. "We'll make it happen." Her smile falls, face becoming somber. "We stand to lose so much in these upcoming days; we will lose so much. In the aftermath, there will be a time of upheaval and turmoil where such change can be enacted." Her smirk is a calculated thing and Sakura wonders if she's been taking lessons from Shikamaru. "Konoha will not be able to afford to lose any of its allies."

"You're right," Sakura says. She looks out over Konoha as she thinks of a neglected sunshine child and the broken, emotionless children who make up the Roots of Konoha. She doesn't fit in the current Konoha, but maybe she will be able to fit into the one they mold after the Summit. After the war that is about to boil over. "Change is necessary and it rises on the horizon."

Sakura stares at the mountains looming on the horizon, smiling at the reminder of her time in Kumo. Tsunade-sama’s retinue set a fast pace across the Lands of Fire and Lightning and they are nearing the Land of Iron. Just two more days of travel and they’ll be at the Summit.

And Sakura will have to plead their case.

She takes a breath, smiling slightly as two hands clamp down on her shoulders, a reminder of the fact that Ashura and Indra are going to be with her, no matter what.

"C’mon, Sakura!" Tenten calls, turning to Sakura. "No time for sightseeing. You can do that on our way back!"
Sakura laughs, running to catch up to the company. She glances over at Itachi, not entirely surprised to see him turned away from her. He's been taciturn and reticent since they left Konoha, since she revealed the truth of the Ōtsutsuki brothers. She bites her lip, but continues on, focusing fully on the travel.

It's monotonous to just be running, but Sakura takes the time to run her upcoming speech through her mind, turning it over and working to perfect it.

When they stop for the night, Sakura volunteers to set up the perimeters alongside Itachi, stepping outside the circle of the camp and ignoring the wink she receives from Sarutobi-sensei.

"We need to talk," Sakura says softly, keeping her attention on Itachi and ignoring the way that the Ōtsutsuki brothers flank her. She knows they're trying to be intimidating, but Itachi cannot even see them. "C'mon."

Itachi meets her gaze, but Sakura cannot read his expressionless face. Still, he follows her as she plants a stake in the one corner of the campground. She forms the hand seals to release the power of the stake, nodding in satisfaction as it glows blue and hums with chakra.

"Will you tell me what the problem is?" Sakura asks, looking up at Itachi from her crouched position. He turns his face away. "Look, I know it has something to do with me and that's fine." She shrugs, turning her eyes down to the ground so he can't see the disappointment that swims there. "I need to know that whatever it is won't interfere with the Summit. We can't allow personal issues to get in the way of our Summit. I know you're a consummate professional but—"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Itachi asks, voice small and hurt.

"Tell you what?" Sakura says, slowly getting back to her feet.

"About the Ōtsutsuki brothers," Itachi replies, refusing to meet her eyes. "I thought we were friends."

"We are," Sakura says, cocking her head as she tries to figure out what the issue is. "What makes you think that we are not?"

"Why didn't you trust me? Friends share secrets, don't they?" Itachi says.

"I do trust you," Sakura replies firmly. She is reminded a bit of Sai, of his attempts to understand the "rules" of friendship. Sakura catches one of Itachi's hands in hers, holding it lightly so he can pull free if he wishes. He does not. "It wasn't necessarily a matter of trust. At least, it wasn't a matter of trust in you specifically. There are secrets that you keep that you don't share with Sasuke, Shisui, or me, right? Confidential missions and clan secrets?"

Itachi nods, brows furrowing with upset. "But this isn't a secret you had to keep."

"I thought that I did," Sakura says, trying to navigate the conversation with delicacy. "I thought I was insane at first. I...there's another voice in my head that speaks to me sometimes. It's more than just a sense of conscience. She's me, but also herself. I thought that I saw them because of her. And then, later on, I wanted to protect Indra and Ashura. It's their secret as much as it is mine."

"You told Sasuke and Naruto," Itachi points out sulkily.

"I did," Sakura says, crossing her fingers and hoping that what she's about to say doesn't alienate him. "Itachi, we are friends, but I don't owe you any of my secrets. You don't owe me any secrets either. I won't tell you that you're wrong to feel angry that I revealed the secret to others before you,
you're allowed to feel however you like. It is not right for you to try to make me feel guilty for my decisions; you don't get to do that."

"Sorry," Itachi says immediately, squeezing her hand. "It just…I didn't like finding out that you carried that burden for years. I could've helped you. I want to help you."

"I forgive you," Sakura replies easily. "You can still help me. This Kage Summit is going to be difficult to navigate; so many forceful personalities trapped in a room together. We have to be careful. Will you watch my back? I'll watch yours."

"Of course," Itachi says, raising warm gray eyes to meet hers. "I'll protect you. It's why I was chosen for this mission, to protect you, Hokage-sama, and Sarutobi-sama."

"Oh ha, ha," Sakura says with a roll of her eyes, releasing his hand and heading toward another corner of the perimeter. "C'mon. We have to finish setting up the barrier. Sarutobi-sensei will begin to worry."

Itachi nods, looking a bit lost. Sakura peeks over at him before slinging an arm around his waist. Itachi stiffens for several long moments and Sakura wonders if she's overstepped her boundaries, but he begins to relax in increments. Aside from Shisui and Mikoto, very few people engage in physical contact with Itachi. Sakura makes a note to herself to try to foster a friendship between him and Sai when they return; she thinks they'll get along well.

"Kisame, is that you?" Mei asks, stepping forward, the expression on her face disbelieving. "Is it really you?"

"Hello Mei," Kisame greets, ducking his head slightly. A grin splits his face. "Or should I call you Mizukage-sama?"

Sakura smiles to herself, glad that they arranged this little meeting prior to the Summit. Kisame is currently decked in chakra suppression seals from head to toe, fūinjutsu binding his chakra beneath his skin. He is in Konoha's custody, awaiting the decision of the Mizukage. Considering the joy on Mei's face, Sakura suspects the decision will be clemency and reinstatement.

"Yes, you should call be Mizukage-sama," Mei says, drinking him in. "You're still a Swordsman, are you not?"

Kisame shrugs, but Sakura can see the relief in his eyes. "Well, that depends on whether the Konoha shinobi return my sword or not."

Mei turns toward Tsunade who smirks, crossing her arms. "I'm sure we can work something out."

Sakura bows to the Hokage and Tsuchikage before nodding at Kisame. She knows they need to catch up with one another and decide on how he will be reinstated after the Summit. She exits the side room, navigating the opulent hallways of one of the Iron Shogun's palaces. Sakura moves toward the banquet hall, showing her dog tags to each of the samurai who stop her along the way.

She enters the banquet hall, starry-eyed at the brilliance that surrounds her.

"S-Sakura-san, it's good to see you again."

"Hello Chōjurō!" Sakura greets, stepping further into the room. "How have you been?"

Chōjurō smiles at her, eyes darting to her face and away. In the time since she last saw him, he's
been through another growth spurt; the top of her head barely clears his collarbone. "I am well, Sakura-san. How is Sashimasu?"

"Hello Chōjurō," Tenten says, sauntering towards them. She's just finished speaking with Tsunade and now she's free to mingle. "Ready for a rematch?"

Sakura watches with curiosity as Chōjurō flushes heavily, wringing his hands in front of himself. Chōjurō is a shy individual, but to have such an extreme reaction…

Sakura hides a smile behind a cough. Someone has a crush. She stands, listening to them discuss weapons enthusiastically when a whisper of sand rasps against her skin. She turns to the side, grinning widely at the group that's just arrived.

She restrains herself from running, but she walks with purpose toward them, heartened by the smiles they give her in turn. "Kazekage-sama," Sakura greets. "Temari-san, Kankuro-san, it is wonderful to see you again! How was your trip here?"

"It was fine, Sakura-san," Temari replies. "Thank you for asking."

"It was cold as hell," Kankuro says bluntly, grunting as Temari digs an elbow into his chest. "What?" he whines. "It was."

Sakura laughs freely at that. "Your desert nights are freezing too," she points out. "I'm the one at disadvantage here; Konoha is too humid to get terribly cold."

"Kankuro is just dramatic," Gaara says, a smile tucked up against his lips. "Not so unlike yourself."

Sakura gasps at that, but her smile belies her faux-anger. "Me? Dramatic? You just say that because you rarely express yourself."

"You express yourself enough for the both of us," Gaara replies, amusement gleaming in his eyes as his eyes flick over the number of layers that she wears. "How in Sage's name do you plan to fight if it becomes necessary?"

"I was just going to leave the fighting to you," Sakura says with a shrug. "As long as I'm warm, I'm fine with sitting on the sidelines."

Gaara stares at her, a softness in his gaze.

"The Iwa delegation just arrived," Kankuro says. "And look where the Tsuchikage is heading."

Sakura turns, startled, to catch Ōnoki beelining his way toward Sarutobi-sensei. Sakura sighs, reading both of their stormy expressions. "Trouble is already brewing. I'm a bit surprised they came at all."

"Sakura, you know as well as I do that oji-sama refuses to be left out of the loop."

Kurotsuchi sidles up beside their group, eyes focused solely on Sakura. Sakura smiles, embracing the woman quickly.

"Kurotsuchi, it is so good to see you! I suppose you're here as one of the Tsuchikage's retainers?" Sakura asks.

"Akatsuchi and me," Kurotsuchi replies, nodding toward the big man that dogs Ōnoki's footsteps. "He's also brought a number of teams left with our hosts. Most of the Bomb Brigade."
"That's good," Sakura says. "We'll need their help if Orochimaru chooses to attack here."

"That wasn't why he brought them," Kurotsuchi says. "Though we were grateful for the warning. He added a few extra teams to the retinue."

"I know," Sakura replies. "Still, it is good to have them here regardless."

Kurotsuchi turns her attention to the others in the circle, recognition lighting her eyes. "Kazekage-sama," she says with a nod, though she does not bow. As the current Tsuchikage's protege in line to inherit the position herself, Kurotsuchi is exempt from certain protocols. "Temari-san, Kankuro-san. I'm not sure if we've had the pleasure of meeting before, I am Kamizuru Kurotsuchi."

"The granddaughter of the Tsuchikage," Gaara says, nodding in turn. His mouth twists slightly at the proximity between Sakura and Kurotsuchi. "It is good to see you made the trip intact."

"Of course," Kurotsuchi says, smirking at him. "We of Iwa are sturdy; you know, rocks as opposed to sand."

Sakura's eyes widen as she looks between them, wondering where the sudden antagonism comes from. She hears Ashura snort though, when she glances at him in her periphery, Indra's elbow is settled firmly into Ashura's side.

"Right," Sakura says, a bit uneasy with the current direction of the conversation. Gaara's self-discipline has improved immensely over the years, but Sakura really doesn't want to test it in a roomful of powerful delegates from the five major shinobi countries. "Have either of you met my colleague Tenten? She's the Godaime Hokage's apprentice and a weapon's master. She and Chōjurō were discussing weaponry techniques when I last left them. Would any of you care to join me in rejoining them?"

"I'm alright," Temari says, hiding a snort at the expression on Gaara's face. She would almost call it pouting and, as fun as it would be to see this all play out, Temari respects her brother's privacy. "Kankuro and I—" She nudges Kankuro discreetly, "—need to speak with Darui-san of the Kumo delegation. Perhaps we'll rejoin you when we're done."

Kankuro almost opens his mouth to protest, but the look on Temari's face and her very sharp, pointy elbows dissuades him from doing so. "Right. We need to speak with Darui about the thing. The very important thing—" He cuts off as Temari begins to walk away. "Sakura-san, it's a pleasure seeing you in good health; Kamizuru-san, wonderful to meet you."

Sakura watches the siblings leave before glancing expectantly at Kurotsuchi and Gaara. "Well?" she asks.

"I will join you, Sakura," Gaara says, placing a tentative but firm hand on her shoulder and staring pointedly at Kurotsuchi.

Kurotsuchi, not to be outdone, does the same with Sakura's opposite shoulder. "We have so much to catch up on, Sakura. Lead the way."

Sakura stifles the urge to frown, especially when she hears Ashura and Indra grumble behind her. She shakes off the urge, heading back toward Tenten with Gaara and Kurotsuchi in tow.

She just hopes that Tenten, with the skills she's gained working with Tsunade-sama, can help mitigate the tension between these two. It wouldn't do to start an international incident, especially before their true enemy attacks.
Sakura bites down on the inside of her cheek, trying to still her nerves. She is seated to the side of the room at the moment as Mifune, Iron's Shogun, stands before the Kages, announcing the purpose of the Summit. She is as ready as she'll ever be, but she cannot keep from being anxious.

She isn't entirely sure why, either. Sakura has stood before each of these Kages at some time or another. Some she counts as close friends or respected allies, others are much more antagonistic. Still, Sakura does not really fear any of these individuals. Her stomach roils and she regrets eating the hors d'oeuvres earlier.

"You will do fine, Sakura-chan," Ashura says, shifting from behind her shoulder to crouch at her side. He places his hand over hers, knowing that she cannot afford to look strange right now. Her "quirks" pass just fine in Konoha, but they will not pass here, especially if they are to trust her word. "They will believe you."

"They'll have to," Indra adds, taking the same position beside Ashura. "They know intimately that Akatsuki is targeting the jinchūriki. They may not believe that it is to create Jūbi once more, but they will see that Akatsuki needs to be stopped."

"Thanks to the intelligence sent to you by Tayuya, they are also tipped off to the likelihood of an attack from Oto. They've brought reinforcements and teams have been sent by Konoha, Kiri, and Suna to dismantle the labs and lairs detailed in Tayuya's missive," Ashura says. "Konoha, Suna, Kiri, and Kumo are united and at peace with each other, through no small effort on your own."

Indra smirks. "And, from the looks of things, Iwa will follow once Ōnoki retires."

Sakura glances up, surprised.

"Kurotsuchi is definitely interested in international relations," Ashura adds, grunting when Indra smacks the back of his head. "It's true!" he says, glaring at his brother. "Not that we'd let her—"

"Haruno Sakura, apprentice of Sarutobi Hiruzen, of Konohagakure, will now speak on the issue of jinchūriki."

Sakura looks up, past the Ōtsutsuki brothers, to the podium where Mifune stands. She rises, walking with a grace she doesn't feel to stand beside him and bowing in respect to the Shogun. "Thank you for the introduction, Mifune-sama."

Sakura steps past Mifune and stares out at each of the Kages in turn. Tsunade and Gaara give her slight smiles that display their confidence in her. Mei and A both smirk, though there is nothing malicious about it. Ōnoki frowns at her, disgruntled, but, considering that she and Sarutobi-sensei fled from his prisons, Sakura isn't surprised.

"Kages, good evening to you all. We are gathered on this auspicious evening with all of the Kages present for the time since the Shodai Hokage. And, like that first Kage Summit, we are here to discuss the jinchūriki."

Sakura pauses and takes a sip of the glass of water at her side, surprised at how parched she suddenly is. "During the first Summit, the discussion was in regards to the distribution of the jinchūriki among the nations. Hashirama-sama did not think it right to keep the jinchūriki together under the umbrella of a single nation."

"Now we know that the jinchūriki are being hunted, picked off one by one by the rogue organization Akatsuki. They have made attempts against each of the jinchūriki and some have succeeded. As of this time, four of the nine original jinchūriki have been attacked and the bijū
removed, with only a single jinchūriki surviving the encounter." She nods toward Gaara who nods in return, a suitably grave look on his face though his eyes sparkle. Sakura wonders if that means that she's doing well or doing poorly.

"I have encountered one of the Akatsuki leaders face-to-face. I went into Amegakure and met with Konan of the Akatsuki and she did not deny the claims that I presented to her."

"And what claims are those, girl?" Ōnoki asks, ignoring the looks of disdain that he receives from all of the other Kages.

Sakura meets his eyes calmly, unafraid of his blatant distaste for her. "The claims that Akatsuki plans to utilize the jinchūriki to reawaken Jūbi, the bijū of ten tails," Sakura says, holding his gaze evenly.

"That is a mere myth," Ōnoki replies, scowling at her thunderously. "You mean to tell me that Konoha called for this Kage Summit over a fairytale?"

"We know that the Sage of Six Paths, Hagoromo, is real. We know that his sons, Ashura and Indra are real." Sakura's lips widen briefly into a smile as she hears Indra and Ashura laugh in her periphery. "Hagoromo's mother, Kaguya, the Mother of All Chakra, is real. Why is it so difficult to believe that Kaguya is also the Mother of Jinchūriki, the Mother of Jūbi? Hagoromo was the first jinchūriki and he was host to Jūbi. As he neared his death, Hagoromo, fearing the power of Jūbi, split him into nine aspects, dividing his power nine ways. The beasts, reduced in power and no longer built of Kaguya's hate and anger, were allowed to roam the countryside freely.

"Then the Warring States Era came and the tailed beasts were tracked down and sealed by the fūinjutsu masters of Uzushiogakure," Sakura says. "Hashirama understood the danger of keeping the tailed beasts all together, the danger of resurrecting Jūbi. He called the Kage Summit and auctioned off the tailed beasts to each of the shinobi nations, assisting them in sealing them within the jinchūriki of choice."

"Are you approaching a point?" Ōnoki asks. "We all know our history."

"Well then, let us prevent history from repeating itself," Sakura replies, eyes sparkling with repressed anger. "Hagoromo and Hamura, considered by us today as veritable gods, could not destroy Jūbi. They tricked him and sealed him within Hagoromo. We cannot allow Akatsuki to accomplish its goals. There is also the matter of Orochimaru, who himself is a former associate of Akatsuki. He may seek the jinchūriki himself as a potential avenue for immortality."

"And what would you have us do?" A asks, leaning back with folded arms. "Our jinchūriki are safely far away, as per your original suggestion. We have kept them safe so far; why call this Kage Summit?"

"Because we need a long-term solution," Tsunade says. "Akatsuki is patient and constantly looking for opportunity. They scavenge and mob the jinchūriki when they are alone and they succeed in overwhelming them. We must unite together and burn Akatsuki and Oto away."

"Oto is Konoha's problem," Ōnoki says. "Konoha born, Konoha raised, and interested in destroying Konoha alone."

"You cannot possibly believe that," Mei says, visible eye widening slightly. "Oto has been dogging each of our borders, killing some shinobi and stealing others away for experimentation. You cannot say that your people haven't been experiencing this problem."
Kurotsuchi stirs slightly at Ōnoki's side and Sakura can see from the expression on her face that Oto is also an issue for Iwa.

"Oto has set up lairs among each of the shinobi nations," Gaara says. "Oto is everyone's problem. They become more bold daily and their attacks are quite similar to Akatsuki. If we do not unite against them, they will continue to slip within the cracks and fester."

"We are stronger together," Sakura says, seeing the stormy look on Ōnoki's face. "We've seen it already in the intergroup teams we send out. Utilizing patrols from all the nations over, it allows us to pursue renegades regardless of borders. When a team from Suna is being overwhelmed in the Land of Water, a Kiri team comes in and saves them. If we wish to fight the guerrilla tactics employed by our enemies, we must be united!"

"That's sweet."

Sakura blinks as a head appears in the middle of the room, pushing through the floor without issue. He looks different than he did before, fully white, rather than split between black and white down the middle.

"Who is this interloper?" Ōnoki demands, leaping to his feet alongside the rest of the Kages.

Zetsu cocks his head to the side, looking at Ōnoki. "You're boring. I'm not here for you."

He rotates, looking around the entire room as his body emerges from the floor. "Out of kindness, I thought I should inform you that Orochimaru and his colleagues are en route to this location. He's perfected his cursed seals."

Zetsu stops as his eyes alight on Sakura. He begins to wade her direction, unimpeded by the floor he moves through. "There you are."

Itachi and Tenten leap from their spots at Tsunade's side, tantos ready to strike. Zetsu merely moves through them, unbothered. Sakura tries to run, only to find her legs encased in Zetsu's white substance. She struggles to free herself as Zetsu swarms forward, embracing her in his arms, which lock into place around her.

Sakura stares into his one gold eye. "What do you want?" she demands, fear filling her. This is the being or at least part of the being that drove Indra from his family.

Zetsu's responding smile is grotesque. "I have need for you."

His twinkling gold eye is the last thing Sakura sees before she is enveloped and she cannot move, she cannot breathe!

Everything goes dark and Sakura feels herself being dragged down, down, down.

All is silent.
Here we are, the final chapter (aside from the epilogue). It's hard to believe that it's finally here, after 3 years of sporadic updates. The fact that this all started as a oneshot and sprawled into my longest story posted here is kind of amazing. Thank you all for joining me and Sakura on this adventure. I hope you all enjoy.

Now, let's see if we can get all these loose ends tied up.

Also, I don't know how the canon final battle goes and I'm not going to try to make it fit it. I'm just making things up as they best fit this story.¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Sakura wakes with a dry mouth to an utterly silent world. She looks around, dazed, taking in the strange, smooth rings that pattern the walls and ground beneath her. She looks up, unable to see the ceiling as it fades to impenetrable darkness. Sakura moves to stand, only to find herself restrained, held bound by a green fibrous material.

It encompasses her fully and Sakura blinks, head aching as she tries to think. Her thoughts are scattered, incomplete and incoherent.

"WAKE UP!" Inner's voice echoes with power in Sakura's mind, snapping Sakura back to attention.

Memories flood back into Sakura's mind as she suddenly realizes that she is encased in Zetsu's flytrap.


She frowns as she realizes that the flytrap drains away her chakra as soon as she reaches for it. She sighs, doing what she can to flex. There's only room enough to breathe, not allowing her to reach for her kunai.

Sakura sighs, leaning back against the smooth wall. Then she frowns.

Where are Ashura and Indra?

Ever since the Incident that brought them to her side those handful of years ago, they have been able to follow her anywhere. Anytime she does anything dangerous, they stay by her side. And this kidnapping absolutely constitutes dangerous. And yet…

Where are they now?

Sakura isn't given too long to contemplate this as Zetsu, an amalgamation of his black and white halves, emerges from the ground, staring at her with glowing, blatantly hungry eyes.

"You're awake," he says, watching her with a fascination that makes her flesh crawl.

"I am," Sakura says, voice flat and monotone. "You kidnapped me. You said you had a need of me."
"For now? Conversation," Zetsu says, emerging fully from the ground and seating himself across from her. He sits cross-legged, leaning forward on his elbows. He looks surprisingly childish. "I want to know you."

"Know me?" Sakura asks. "I'm not that interesting."

Zetsu tuts, shaking his head. "Come now, there is no need for false modesty. You are quite fascinating. You're one of very few living people to visit all of the Five Great Shinobi Nations and, from the appearances of that conference, you made a number of friends along the way. You have a sort of...charisma." He shifts closer to her and Sakura can feel his breath fan across her face. It's strangely cool and smells of damp soil and blood. "It draws people in."

Sakura's expression twists with distaste, but she holds her gaze steady. She won't be the first one to avert her eyes in this little game they're playing. She may be wholly at his mercy, but he cannot break her will. "So, I've traveled a lot," she demurs. "It comes of acting as Sarutobi-sensei's apprentice. It had little to do with me."

"Perhaps," Zetsu hums, uncrossing his legs and stretching his toes her way. Sakura can do nothing but watch as his toes touch the flytrap, entwining with it in a mixture of green, black, and white. She swallows, throat tasting of ash when he sighs blissfully, closing his eyes as he soaks in her chakra. "You taste of Her. Different certainly, but close."

"Who?" Sakura asks, dreading the answer. She thinks she knows and she hopes—prays—she is wrong.

"I know you see them," he says abruptly, eyes snapping open to watch her.

"Who do I see?" Sakura asks, even as her heart begins to beat a rough staccato.

"Ghosts," Zetsu says. "Monsters and gods from another era, another realm entirely. They're magnificent aren't they? The living pale in comparison. And yet, they are but a mere fraction of Her splendor. Flesh and blood of an immortal, a true immortal. The Great Goddess. My Mistress." His expression is euphoric.

"Kaguya," Sakura whispers.

"You dare speak Her name?" Zetsu demands, enraged. His hand presses against her throat, cutting off her air. Sakura's vision begins to fill with black spots. Then, suddenly, he pulls back, releasing her neck. "I suppose it is not profane if it is you."

"Why isn't it?" Sakura asks, voice an injured rasp.

"You are of Her," Zetsu says. "I am Her most ardent acolyte, Her most faithful. I have served Her Will for centuries, biding my time. You are the first who has even possessed a shadow of Her spirit. And you possess much, much more than just a shadow."

"You speak in riddles," Sakura says. "I don't understand."

"You are a fractured soul, a fractured mind, who can see the fractured spirits of Her line. All that you are is the sum of Her."

"I am her reincarnation?" Sakura asks, unsure how she feels about the revelation. All that she's heard of Kaguya speaks of her evil. She tried to murder her children after all.
Zetsu shrugs, unconcerned by the dumbstruck look on Sakura's face. "Perhaps. I sense Her within you, though the time has yet to come for Her to awaken. But soon." He cocks his head, looking as if he is listening to something beyond them. Sakura tries but is unable to hear anything at all. "It seems like things are building to a crescendo around us."

"What's happening? You mentioned Orochimaru and Kabuto—"

"Do not worry about that now," Zetsu interrupts. "Allow me to tell you a story."

"A story?"

"This is the story of how chakra came into being," Zetsu says. "I'm sure your ghosts have told you a version of the story, but they were not there."

"Were you?" Sakura asks, wondering.

"No. Only the Goddess was present. She was wife to the emperor of the Land of Ancestors. She ruled him and Her people well and they loved Her in turn, but She did not care for the unnecessary violence and bloodshed of humanity. When Her people came under threat, the Goddess sought out the God Tree as was Her right as its guardian."

"She found it," Zetsu says. "She defied the rules of the Ōtsutsuki, which said to leave the God Tree alone so that it could harvest the energy of the people and lands of this planet. She consumed the chakra fruit of the tree, produced once every thousand years. She became the first being on this planet to wield chakra."

"With Her chakra, She united all of the warring nations and brought about peace throughout the lands. I was born of Her will to act as an extension of Herself as needed. Her seed was fruitful and She bore two sons, who stole away Her chakra." Zetsu's face twists. "They threatened to end the order within Her world. So, in her divine knowledge, She united with the God Tree and rained devastation down upon Her unruly children."

"Jūbi," Sakura says. "She became the Jūbi."

"Indeed," Zetsu says, before sighing. "I've taken far too much time. Everything is in motion; the time of culmination is nigh. Your role in all of this is far from over. Still, our time together is drawing to a close."

The flytrap around Sakura draws away from her neck and shoulders, though it still leaves her unable to move much. Zetsu draws close to her, uncomfortably close as he reaches out one long-fingered hand and brushes it along the column of her throat. Sakura's throat works beneath his fingertips but Zetsu doesn't linger, instead unspooling the necklace around her neck.

He pulls it free, lifting it so Sakura can see it. In his hand, dangles Kisame and Kabuto's Akatsuki rings.

"You have no need of these," Zetsu says. "I, however, do."

Sakura watches as they are absorbed into his skin, glad that she returned the other rings to Konan. She hopes that Konan still has hold of them. Whatever Zetsu has planned, it cannot be good.

"Before I release you," Zetsu says, watching her with his strange, hungry eyes, "I would like a boon. You are not Her, but you are close enough, for now. And I've waited so long…"

Sakura inhales sharply as the flytrap releases suddenly and Zetsu reaches forward, grasping her
hand. Sakura doesn't try to fight it, not yet anyway. She knows this isn't a fight she can win, not with the environment in his favor.

He brings her hand close, dragging the back of it along his face and down to his lips. Zetsu presses a kiss to the back of her hand before releasing her completely.

"I will see you again soon," Zetsu says. "So goodbye for now."

Sakura opens her mouth to respond, but she is dragged down, down, down.

And suddenly, sound.

Sakura isn't given a chance to regain her bearings before she has to roll to the side, dodging the blade directed squarely at her face. She looks up, seeing the aberrant nature to the person, the black flames licking across the person's bulging, twisted skin.

Orochimaru's cursed seal.

Oto.

Sakura swallows, contorting her body in a strange, uncomfortable manner to get her feet in position to kick her enemy in the gut. The blow knocks the man off-balanced, perhaps in part because his balance is already compromised by the writhing wing-like appendage that emerges from his back.

It gives Sakura time to get to her feet, eyes flitting around the area. She doesn't really know where they are, probably somewhere in Iron, but everything is absolute chaos.

She sees people dressed in the uniforms of Suna, Kumo, Kiri, Iwa, and Konoha, all fighting side by side against people twisted by Orochimaru and Kabuto's experiments as well as…

Is that the Nidaime Hokage?

Sakura barely manages to avoid a clawed strike from the Oto shinobi, stunned as she is by the appearance of a man who is supposed to be dead.

In fact, as she stabs the shinobi in front of her with a kunai laced with paralytics, Sakura realizes there are quite a few dead shinobi fighting against her friends.

What the hell happened while she was kidnapped?

"Sakura!"

Sakura finds herself ensconced firmly within a sudden embrace. Unlike the helpless feeling that being held by Zetsu's flytrap invoked, this embrace is gentle, kind, but no less fervent and desperate. Even though they are in the middle of a battle for life and death, Sakura doesn't resist the embrace, leaning into them.

They feel solid and nearly warm.

"Where were you?" Ashura demands, squeezing her tight, even as they begin moving her off to somewhere out of the heat of the fighting.

"We've been waiting for you," Indra says, cupping her face and surveying her. "We kept trying to come to you but we were blocked off."
"Until just now," Ashura says. "What did that bastard do to you?"

"Nothing," Sakura says, eyes shifting past their relieved expressions to the pandemonium around them. "What happened here? How long have I been gone?"

"You've been gone for two days, maybe?" Ashura says.

"When Zetsu absconded with you, we were transferred back to Sasuke and Naruto's sides," Indra says. "They were making their way to Iron, having been intercepted in their journey to Orochimaru's prisons by one of Tayuya's messengers. When they were informed of Orochimaru's plans, they changed course to head here."

"We tried to reach you every fifteen minutes or so, but the path was deadened," Ashura says. He runs his thumb along her cheekbone beneath her eye. "What happened while you were gone?"

"Nothing much," Sakura says. "I was unconscious for most of the encounter. When I came to Zetsu spoke about Kaguya and his origins and then took the Akatsuki rings from me." She swallows. "He's trying to resurrect the Jūbi and, by extension, Kaguya. But that isn't the most pressing problem. Why are dead legendary figures like the Shodai Hokage fighting our people?"

"Orochimaru," Indra says as if it is as simple as all of that.

And, considering the man's obsession with the concepts of immortality and resurrection, perhaps it is.

"Any idea why they are fighting us?" Sakura asks.

"They're being controlled by Orochimaru and Kabuto," Ashura says. "We get rid of them..."

"We end the effect," Sakura says, before sighing. "Well, that solves some things at least. Could you take me to Sarutobi-sensei?"

"Of course," Indra says as Ashura flickers out of sight before reappearing.

"He's near Naruto right now," Ashura reports, sweeping Sakura up into his arms. He gives her a gallant grin and, despite the literal war sprawling around them, Sakura cannot help but smile in return. It's nice to know that some things stay the same. "Indra?"

Indra sighs, shaking his head, but he places his hands on Sakura's shoulders and all three flicker and disappear from that spot, reappearing beside Naruto.

"Sakura-chan!" Naruto cries, unfazed by her sudden appearance. They've practiced this handy little trick a handful of times on the training grounds, "Good to see you. Itachi and Tenten were really worried, but I knew you would turn up eventually."

Sakura blanches. "Sarutobi-sensei?"

Sakura laughs, throwing a kunai at the woman about to strike Naruto with her tanto. "I appreciate the faith, Naruto. Good to know you always have my back. What's the current situation?"

"We're engaging all of Oto, as well as a number of individuals resurrected by Orochimaru and Kabuto using something they call 'Impure World Reincarnation.'" Naruto rolls his eyes, showing exactly what he thinks of the technique's name. "Team Seven has split up to handle different tasks, last I saw, Karin and Sai were joining the old man to face Orochimaru."

Sakura blanches. "Sarutobi-sensei?"
"Yes," Naruto says, pushing her down so he can dropkick an assailant in the face. "The Kages are fighting...well, the former Kages."

"I...I have to go," Sakura says, eyes searching the field for Sarutobi-sensei. She won't leave him to confront his former student. They do this together, like before. This time, they'll win. They have to. "I can't leave him alone."

"Go ahead, Sakura-chan," Naruto says, clapping her on the shoulder. "I need to stick around here to back the bastard up, but we can follow——"

"I know," Sakura interrupts, clasping his forearm. Something settles within her to be back in the field with Team Seven, with Naruto and Sasuke, like they were back in their youth. Back when they were naive and so full of hope. Now, Sakura's eyes are wide open, but she still holds onto that hope, even though it may damn her. "You'll follow when you can. I'll see you soon."

"You're my family, Sakura. I am with you until the end," Naruto says, watching her with serious eyes. Then he stretches out a hand and points in a direction. "I last saw the old man over that way. I'll see you soon, Sakura."

And then they are darting apart from each other, as Sakura delves into the writhing mass of bodies that they call war. Sakura fights the bile that rises in her throat at the sight of the piling dead left forgotten on the ground, crushed beneath the weight of the continued fighting. She doesn't have time to stop and see if she knows any of them. Considering the contacts she's made in all of the shinobi nations, even in Oto, she wouldn't be surprised.

And the smell: iron, piss, and death hangs low and full in the air, nearly overwhelming Sakura's nose. Her eyes water from the stench of it, but she wipes away the sting of it, evading the errant blows and jutsus that head her way.

No, she keeps her eyes on the living, seeking Sarutobi-sensei in every face she passes. Sakura doesn't know how she'll find him in this madness, but she holds out hope.

"Any ideas?" Sakura asks the brothers.

"My guess is that most people are giving Orochimaru a wide berth," Indra says. "He's a deadly fighter."

"Karin's a Sensor," Ashura points out. "She taught you a bit about chakra sensing. Why don't you try reaching out that way?"

Sakura could slap herself for her foolishness. In her desperate rush, she didn't even consider it. "Of course!"

She reaches into herself, tugging at her chakra. She casts it beyond herself in a fine sheet like a net, seeking out the biggest, most dangerous fish she can find. Sakura calls to mind her memories of Orochimaru, fraught with that sickly, overwhelming sense of dread his chakra fairly oozes. In her scant handful of encounters with him, Sakura has become only too familiar with the sensation of his chakra. It's imprinted on her, leaving a mark that she thinks will never be removed.

She is almost knocked to her knees by the feedback that surges up her net and through her. There are so many incredibly strong people in the general vicinity, some with chakras far exceeding Orochimaru's, but only one exudes a certain sense of wrongness, something inhuman.

Orochimaru.
Sakura turns in that direction, honing her sheet of chakra into a fine thread attached to Orochimaru. She begins to Shunshin towards him, even as her heart rate picks up its pace.

Is she ready for this? Can she confront this man once again?

Her leg twinges, not because of exertion, but because of a deeper psychological pain.

Last time, Orochimaru took her leg.

Will he take her life this time?

Another limb?

Her humanity?

She knows, logically, that she is far stronger than she was those handful of years ago, when she was just a young, barely tested chunin unprepared for the horrors that Orochimaru and Kabuto offered her on a platter.

And worse still, is the memory of Sarutobi-sensei's failure, of his inability and unwillingness to fight off his former student. That betrayal, though forgiven, still stings, still twinges in the back of her mind.

And today promises to be a repeat of that scenario: Orochimaru and Kabuto raining death and destruction down on any who stand in their path; Karin confronting her nightmares made flesh; Sarutobi-sensei staring down the monster he had a hand in creating.

What will Sakura's role be in this today?

Will she be the futile, last-ditch defense? The sacrifice made to protect those around her? The martyr leaping upon the pyre in her teacher's place? Will she play a new role entirely?

Will Sakura even make it to them in time?

"Sakura."

Sakura stops in her tracks, paling as her eyes find the individual who called out to her. Before her, his skin marred with strange porcelain-thin cracks, stands Haku.

Haku.

He looks exactly as he did upon his final day alive, beautiful, angelic, determined. She's taller than he is, she realizes suddenly. Sakura is struck by how young he is, how young she was, and how tragically unfair that entire mission in Mist was.

Were they truly so young when they started killing?

She can hardly believe it, looking at his thin, bird-like wrists and painfully lithe frame.

How could he even bear the weight of a weapon, let alone handle it?

"Haku," Sakura says, unable to keep the rawness from his name. After all, she carries the weight of that name in the crack he left in her heart. "How?"

His expression is utterly smooth as he dashes forward, striking out at her with a kunai. Sakura barely manages to raise a kunai of her own, parrying the blow.
"Haku, why?" she demands.

"I do not have control," Haku says, voice soft. "Even as I was in life, in death I am still a mere tool. I am an extension of another's will, this is nothing new."

"But in life, you chose to serve Zabuza," Sakura says, dodging back from another strike. She can tell he isn't using his full strength, he hasn't even brought out his kekkei genkai. "You chose to live for the sake of another. You chose to be his weapon. This wasn't a choice for you; it is a yoke forced upon you."

"Perhaps," Haku says, with a shrug, darting in close and nicking Sakura's cheek before she can throw up her guard. "I was at peace. I remember warmth, fulfillment…and suddenly I am here once more within the mortal coil. Release is the promise we received for doing as we were bid." His eyes slant past her for a moment, alighting on the figures that follow her. His lips curl slightly. "How long have these ghosts been following you? When will you release them from your bidding?"

Sakura falters at those words and Haku drives forward savagely, kunai scraping against bone in Sakura's arm. She hisses, but firms her stance.

"We aren't held here against our will," Indra says. "We choose to stay with Sakura."

"Sakura is a beacon within this mortal coil," Ashura says. "She's a bright light; the only damn reason this mortal coil has any meaning."

"Still you serve the whims of a master beyond yourself," Haku says. "You do as she commands."

"That isn't how it works," Sakura says, grabbing Haku's arm. It's made easier by the fact that his kunai is still wedged in her forearm. "Don't you remember our conversation before the fight? I certainly do! I think of it all the time. We served purposes beyond ourselves, masters beyond ourselves. You fought to protect Zabuza. I fought for my friends' smiles. We…we made a promise of a lifetime."

Sakura sees the way his eyes widen, realization striking him. That show of emotion gives Sakura the courage to lean in, past his guard and hers, pressing her lips to his forehead.

"We sealed the promise with a kiss," she whispers against his skin, encouraged by the fact that he doesn't dig the kunai deeper into her arm.

"I forgot how warm this world can be," Haku murmurs as she pulls away.

Sakura takes in his smile, seeing the peace on his face. She cups his cheek with her free hand, ignoring the way his kunai catches against bone as she shifts, even as she sees Ashura and Indra watching him warily.

"Thank you, Sakura," Haku says. Sakura gasps, starting forward as his body begins to fade, disintegrating. "I hope you find it Sakura."

"Find what?" Sakura asks, watching with a combination of horror and resignation as his body continues to disappear. It can't end, not again, not like this.

"Halcyon days," Haku replies. "Sakura, you sought the happiness of your friends. If I learned anything in death, it is that you must make your own happiness. Sakura, seek out your own halcyon days." He smirks, an incongruous expression on his face. "I'm sure your ghosts will be happy to assist. Live well, Sakura. Farewell."
Sakura swallows as Haku disappears, a gentle smile gracing his lips. She stares at the dust that was once Haku, happy in the knowledge that he can no longer be manipulated beyond the grave. Not like that. Not again.

Now, Haku can truly be at peace.

Sakura raises her gaze, feeling along the chakra thread connecting her to Orochimaru.

She firms her jaw as she sets off once again.

"Halcyon days, Haku," she whispers, ignoring the glances she receives from the Ōtsutsuki brothers. "Soon."

The closer she gets, the more scared she becomes. Orochimaru's chakra is overwhelmingly oppressive and closely tied to the nightmares that continue to haunt her.

Her leg, where the prosthetic connects to living flesh, aches sharply as Sakura remembers the sensation of being boiled alive from within, innards burning, burning, burning until nothing is left, nothing but the poison that runs through her veins.

It still remains the worst pain she has yet experienced in her life and Sakura's animal instincts command her to flee, to hide, to survive.

Still, as Sakura crests a rolling hill and sees the scene playing out before her, she knows she cannot flee.

She will fight, even if it spells her death.

Below her, Sarutobi-sensei and Orochimaru stand facing one another, as their Summons tangle with one another. They aren't yet engaged in physical combat but, knowing their intellectual prowess, Sakura is sure that they are engaged in battle in another way. She swallows as Enma tussles with Manba, surprised that both of them Summoned their strongest Summons so early on in this fight.

Sai stands at Sarutobi-sensei's side, expression blank but knuckles white around his tanto. Karin is situated behind Sarutobi-sensei, a large bruise blooming high on her cheek. Still, she seems to be relatively intact and furiously at work painting seals upon her skin.

Pride filters through Sakura, heartened to see Karin's strength in the face of her oppressor.

Ashura's hand clasps her shoulder hardily even as Indra traces his fingers along the inside of her elbow in support. She firms her stance, reminded that this fight is already different from the one that occurred prior.

This time Indra and Ashura are with her from the start.

Orochimaru's gold eyes flicker up in Sakura's direction, a sinuous smirk curling up his lips. Sakura isn't given a moment to think, let alone react, before Orochimaru crooks his finger and Sakura finds her body being dragged forward. She doesn't panic, releasing Sashimasu and filling it with chakra, slicing it through the chakra string Orochimaru uses to pull her.

She's fought Sasori of the Red Sands; Orochimaru's chakra strings cannot hope to compare to the Puppet Master's.
Orochimaru's smirk becomes a true smile as he watches her, expression becoming one of hunger and ambition. "How good of you to join us, Sakura-chan! I was worried you wouldn't show up; what kept you so long?"

"I had other affairs to attend," Sakura replies, clinging to her bravado to keep from shaking. The burning pain where her leg once was reminds her well what happened the last time she was the focus of Orochimaru's attention. "I figured you would keep until those were complete."

Orochimaru laughs lightly, but Sakura reads the banked fires in his eyes; the rage at her slight. As a controlling narcissist, such insults are sure to stir Orochimaru's ire higher and higher. He bares his teeth at her, leaning forward.

"You forget yourself Orochimaru!" Sarutobi-sensei barks, startling Sakura and Orochimaru and drawing their attention. "Your fight is with me, not with my student."

Orochimaru chuckles, seemingly at ease as Sakura makes her way to stand slightly behind Sarutobi-sensei.

"You alright?" Sakura asks, placing a hand on Karin's cheek, fingers outlining her bruise.

"The other guy looks worse," Karin says. She frowns slightly, pressing a hand over Sakura's arm wound and healing it. "Well, he did before he started healing."

"Kabuto?"

"Kabuto," Karin sighs. "Last I saw, Ino-Shika-Chō were engaging him, alongside a medic-nin from Kumo."

Sakura tamps down on her instinctual fear for her friends. "Well, Kabuto may have just must his match. I wonder how he'll manage against Konoha's own Poison Mistress."

"If all goes well, not well at all," Sai replies. Sakura notes the anxiety held in the tight corners of his eyes. "Hello Sakura."

"Sai," she greets in turn, brushing her fingers across his cheek, before returning her attention to the main event.

Her gut flutters with a mingle of gratitude and joy as she takes in Sarutobi-sensei's firmed jaw and flinty eyes.

It goes a long way to healing the lingering sting of betrayal.

"You were always given to pontification," Sarutobi-sensei says, cutting through Orochimaru's speech with a surgeon's ease. "Yet you never understood when you lost your audience. Tsunade-hime mastered the art of sleeping with her eyes open because of you."

Sakura has never seen someone go so pale before turning so red this quickly. Orochimaru opens his mouth to respond, but Sarutobi-sensei nods curtly towards Enma.

Enma grapples Manda, perching himself upon Manda's head and wrapping his powerful legs around Manda's throat. He pries open Manda's jaws with a sickening crack of bone and reaches inside to grasp his fangs in gauntleted hands. Sakura flinches as a horrendous, wet sound fills the air as Enma rips the fangs out of Manba's mouth.

Enma takes the fangs, legs tightening around Manda as Manda screams and thrashes in agony, and
drives the fangs through Manda's eyes.

Sakura watches every moment of Manda's cacophonous, writhing death, a vindictive portion of herself settling as Manda falls dead at Sarutobi-sensei's feet.

"I am done sitting idly by, allowing you to run rampant," Sarutobi-sensei says, unflinching in the face of Orochimaru's shock. "In my complacency, I had a hand in each of the foul deeds you committed. Your continuous violence against humanity, the atrocities of your experimentations, the death and destruction you leave in the wake of your greedy but ultimately futile pursuit of immortality; each pound of flesh you take in another, I too hold a responsibility."

Sarutobi-sensei sighs, eyes sliding shut as he reaches out a hand to Enma. Enma nods, transforming into his staff form. "As your teacher, it is my duty to correct you when you are wrong. In sparing the rod, you spoil the child; I have spoiled you far too much. I apologize for not taking you to task earlier in your life; perhaps we could have avoided so much of the suffering of the past few decades. Perhaps it wouldn't end in death." Sarutobi-sensei opens his eyes. "Perhaps not. Nevertheless, this battle has been long overdue."

"You think you can face me?" Orochimaru nearly spits, rage breaking his composure. Sakura's never seen him so off-balanced. "You are nothing Hiruzen. Maybe once you deserved the title of 'God of Shinobi,' but now you are nothing but a brittle husk. You are a shadow of the shinobi you once were. This is what age does to the human body; weakens it to a state of complete incompetence. Me," He gestures to himself, "with each host I take, I draw closer to perfection. You inch closer to death with every breath you take; I move closer to life." Orochimaru unhinges his jaw and draws out Kusanagi. "In fact, you should enjoy these next few moments, they shall be your last."

"Even with decades of experiments, you are no closer to immortality," Sarutobi-sensei says, shaking his head. "It is an unachievable goal; you merely prolong the inevitable. Death is a natural part of life and, in fearing it so much that you seek to prevent it, you've missed out on the joys that come of living. You've driven away anyone and everyone who ever could have loved you. You are alone. Now, let us see if you remember what I tried to teach you."

Sarutobi-sensei leaps forward, staff extending and striking Orochimaru's sword hard. Orochimaru whirls out of his way, driving his sword up and under Sarutobi-sensei's guard to hit his side. Sarutobi-sensei twists in a nimble way that impresses Sakura, avoiding the blade.

Orochimaru throws a glance toward Sakura. "Trying to make up for past mistakes with your apprentice? Vacillating between throwing her to the dogs and coddling her does her no good."

Sarutobi-sensei looks sidelong at Sakura and grins impishly, taking decades off his face. "Sakura, would you care to join me? Her skill in kenjutsu is sublime."

Sakura raises Sashimasu in response and dives into the fray. She can feel Indra and Ashura's presences nearby, not involved, but watching avidly. She knows that the moment things go south they will interfere with the fight to assist her. Sakura knows their skills and her trust in them is a warm, solid weight within her chest. They have her back.

And she has Sarutobi-sensei's.

Even better, he has hers.

Behind them, Sakura knows that Karin and Sai are hard at work with fūinjutsu, preparing to entrap Orochimaru. Orochimaru has thus far ignored them and Sakura is thankful for small mercies.
Hopefully, Orochimaru's hubris tolls his downfall.

Or perhaps he truly has nothing to be concerned about.

Kusanagi snakes around beneath Sarutobi-sensei's staff and Sakura rolls across his back, sticking her leg between the blade and Sarutobi-sensei as a shield. Kusanagi strikes her prosthetic leg with a horrific screech of metal on metal as the blade pierces the leg but Sakura is undeterred, sending a surge of elemental chakra through Sashimasu. The elemental chakra flares through the blade of the naginata, stabbing Orochimaru in the arm.

Orochimaru's left arm drops, charred and useless to his side.

He scowls, trying to tense the muscles of his arm, only to find the entire arm numb.

Sakura has learned from her past battles and adapted the techniques that Tenten shared with her from her tutelage with Tsunade. There is a reason that medic nins are prized and always the first to be targeted by enemies.

Kusanagi snaps back to Orochimaru who laughs, high-pitched and deadly. "Oh well done, Sakura-chan! Your form has improved since our last fight. Hiruzen, I'm a bit disappointed honestly; this is the best that the God of Shinobi has to offer? You've only displayed skills that a samurai would have. Where is your pride as a shinobi?"

"Pride?" Sarutobi-sensei scoffs. "I have known pride; I have held and lost it countless times. What use have I for pride? It leads only to folly and a gross overestimation of my own abilities. A true shinobi knows the extent of his strengths and his weaknesses." A sly smile curls his lips. "And a true shinobi does not underestimate his foes."

Orochimaru pauses, seemingly thrown, before his eyes go wide as he catches sight of Karin and Sai beyond Sakura and Sarutobi-sensei.

Karin stands, the seals painted on her arms in bold strokes by her and Sai's hands turning from black to gold as she activates them. Chains shoot from Karin's arms, seeking out Orochimaru. He dodges back, flipping and ducking to avoid the chains, but they are unstoppable.

Sakura watches with awe as the chains strike Orochimaru, looping around him and restraining him in place. She sees his still functional hand form the seals for a number of replacement jutsus, but none of them work.

Such power in fūinjutsu is the reason that Uzumaki were once so feared and renowned the world over. (This is the reason that Uzushio fell; not because the Uzumaki failed, but because they were so powerful and such power breeds envy and fear.)

And Karin and Naruto (and Tayuya perhaps and countless others) are their legacy.

Sakura's eyes burn as she stares at those gold chains, holding a legendary Sannin—her personal bogeyman—in place. She can hardly believe how far Karin has come from the child ravaged by war to this avenging scourge of a woman.

"I've learned some things in the past few years," Karin says evenly, staring Orochimaru directly in the eyes. She will not wilt beneath the force of him and all that he represents to her. "It's amazing what a little support and knowledge can do for a girl. Doesn't hurt to have an ancestor's journals of all her exploits and jutsu creation. You aren't walking away from this."

"And you think you are capable of killing me?" Orochimaru's laugh is high and cold, ringing above
the din of death around them. "You are still the sniveling, war-ravaged, broken child you were when I found you. You are nothing!"

"No," Karin says, her voice cracking slightly with the force of her emotions, but her hands and chains are steady and firm. "I am everything. Konoha has taught me my worth and it is beyond all measure. You seek to cut down, take apart, destroy; anything you can do to achieve your goal, no matter who you leave shattered in your wake. You don't comprehend the invaluable measure of man; it's why you left Konoha in your wake. It may perhaps be the greatest of all your many errors."

"You know nothing you ingrate—" Orochimaru hisses, features serpentine and venomous.

"Enough," Sarutobi-sensei says.

Sakura glances at him, startled by the sheer weariness in his voice. He looks exhausted, but unshakeable.

"Enough of your poison, Orochimaru, enough," Sarutobi-sensei says, slowly moving his hands through different seals: snake to boar to ram. "This has gone on for far too long, Orochimaru. It ends today." Rabbit to dog to rat. "It ends here, with us. It ends as it should have the last time we confronted each other."

"Sarutobi-sensei, don't!" Sakura says, realizing what he intends to do.

The Dead Demon Consuming Seal.

He looks to her, hands still moving: bird to horse to snake. "Sakura, I apologize once more for my failings last time. It was wrong of me to leave you to fend against my mistakes. This time will be different."

Sarutobi-sensei claps his hands together.

Sakura watches, horrified as his soul separates partially from his body, suspended behind himself.

"You try this again?" Orochimaru demands, bursting into laughter. "Hiruzen, you truly are but a collection of mistakes and incompetence."

"That's enough from you," Karin says, throwing forth another chain and looping it around his neck. It presses against his vocal cords, leaving him incapable of speaking. "It's over, Orochimaru."

Behind Sarutobi-sensei, the shimmery, pale form of the Shinigami takes shape. Its face turns slightly, black eyes fixating unerringly upon Ashura and Indra. Sakura, in turn, steps between them and the Shinigami, protecting them from its gaze.

She will allow no one, not even a god of death, to tear them from her.

The Shinigami regards her for a moment and Sakura can feel the brothers tense behind her, before the Shinigami returns its attention to its true prey.

Orochimaru.

Sarutobi-sensei moves forward at a slow, even pace, the Shinigami trailing along behind him. Sakura follows in his footsteps, unsure what she should do. She knows what will happen to Sarutobi-sensei all too well.
In ensuring Orochimaru's death, he seals his own fate as well.

"Sarutobi-sensei, there are other ways," Sakura says, nearly begging.

"No, Sakura dear, there are not. Orochimaru has perverted everything about himself: his body, his heart, his mind. Killing him by normal means is impossible now, given the way he sheds his skin and is born anew. The only pure portion of him left is his soul," Sarutobi-sensei says.

"But you'll die; your soul will be forfeit to the Shinigami," Sakura says, desperate to make him see reason.

But Sarutobi-sensei only chuckles, the sound heavy and sad. The Shinigami reaches out, touching Orochimaru. His mouth goes wide and a garbled, strangled scream emerges, even as his soul begins to pull away from his body. "My soul has been forfeit from the moment, decades ago, I allowed Orochimaru to escape. I stood at a crossroads and I chose passivity. His atrocities are my own. And on top of all of that, I allowed him near you; I let you fight a battle that was not yours because I was not strong enough. And there are not apologies enough in the world, to make it up to you."

"Sarutobi-sensei, I've forgiven you; please, let us try something different," Sakura says.

"It is my turn to protect you, Sakura-chan," Sarutobi-sensei says, gentle but firm. "Please, allow this old man to make this paltry gesture of apology. It is my time to go and far past Orochimaru's."

Sarutobi-sensei's eyes slide shut as the Shinigami pulls at Orochimaru's soul, but Sakura frowns, seeing how little he moves.

"What's wrong? What's happening?" she asks, glancing askance at her resident experts on all things spirit-related.

"Orochimaru's will is strong," Ashura says, a scowl curling his lips.

"Hiruzen is strong, but I am not sure he'll be able to withstand Orochimaru," Indra adds.

"No," Sakura says, swallowing as she realizes what she is about to do, what it means for Sarutobi-sensei. "This ends."

Sakura doesn't hesitate, banishing Sashimasu, reaching out, and wrapping both hands around one of Sarutobi-sensei's, despite the recriminations Indra and Ashura yell at her, voices sharp with fear and concern. She can feel the focus of the Shinigami on her, its overbearing weight, but she stands firm, bringing up every hateful thought toward Orochimaru to the forefront of her mind.

His reign of terror cannot persist, not with the wanton destruction left in his wake.

Orochimaru's soul slips further from his body and further still when Ashura and Indra place their hands on her back, adding their power to hers.

Where she goes, they go.

Sai approaches Sarutobi-sensei from the other side, laying his hands on him.

Orochimaru's soul is nearly entirely separated from his body and Sakura shakes, sweat pouring down her face in exertion. He is strong, she'll give him that. If she faced him alone, as she did during the Incident, she knows she would fall.
Again.

However, Sakura is not alone.

Ashura and Indra's hands are cold against her overheated skin, a small comfort that keeps her centered and anchored as she grits her teeth. She draws on all the pain Orochimaru caused her: the physical, the mental, and the emotional pain she suffered at his hands. She remembers the struggle within herself over her sense of failure, the war to get herself out of bed many days because of the bone-deep exhaustion that clung to her very soul; the overwhelming sense of self-loathing she experienced for over a year every time she looked in the mirror.

All of it, all of it, can be traced back to this monster masquerading in human flesh before her.

She can't let him loose, can't allow him to tamper with the lives of other innocents.

With herculean effort, Sakura shores up all the spiritual strength she and Inner have and yanks.

Orochimaru's soul tears free of his body and the Shinigami's maw opens wide to consume him.

But Sakura isn't watching him.

No, her eyes are on Sarutobi-sensei, as she catches his body against hers, cradling him against her chest. Until now, she did not realize how small he is, how fragile. He's shorter than her by a good three inches.

Sakura gathers him close as she sobs, saline dripping down her cheeks onto his. She is ignorant of the way Orochimaru's limp body hits the ground, still wrapped in Karin's chains. She is oblivious to the way that Karin and Sai move to stand at her unprotected back, guarding her against attack. She is ignorant to all things but Sarutobi-sensei.

Sakura traces the deep wrinkles in his face, drinking in his slack features. Without his soul, he looks less wise, less him. She'll never again hear his stories or lighthearted teasing or travel at his side, sole companions for weeks on end. She'll never again stand in his garden, assisting him in planting as they debate international politics with a sharp but never cutting banter.

She'll never again have him there to guide her, to keep her from straying.

He's been a fixture in her life since childhood and she has never truly imagined a life without him.

Her sobs trail off into wet hiccups and Sakura realizes suddenly that Indra is holding her in his arms just as she holds Sarutobi-sensei, rocking her gently back and forth, chest vibrating with the force of his humming. Ashura is seated in front of her and to the side slightly, humming a gentle tune as his fingers brush away her tears. Behind her, she hears the sounds of battle, of Karin and Sai doing their damnedest to keep her safe and protected.

So she blinks, taking a few deep, rattling breaths through her mouth before rubbing her nose against her sleeve. When she's a bit more put together, though still very much fallen apart, she looks at Sarutobi-sensei, really looks at him.

Her heart aches like an open and bleeding wound, but she pushes beyond that, taking in his expression.

"He looks happy," she says, voice raw and hoarse. Her brows furrow; no, happy isn't quite right. "At peace."
And so he does. Something about that fact calms her raging heart. She wasn't able to prevent this outcome, not when Sarutobi-sensei was resolved to see it through. Knowing that he was at peace with that difficult decision helps.

Sakura sighs and shifts Sarutobi-sensei with the utmost care so that he is laying on the ground. She stands, turning to Karin. "May I have a few empty sealing scrolls, Karin?"

"Of course," she says, her chains looping around a few of her Oto assailants. They go still. She rustles in her pack, pulling a couple loose and tossing them to Sakura. "There you go."

Sakura nods, taking the first scroll and opening it. She raises a finger to her mouth, swiping at the blood around her lip (she must have bitten through it during the showdown with Orochimaru) and pressing a bloody finger to the scroll. It glows with power as she places it upon Sarutobi-sensei, drawing him into the scroll.

Should she survive this war, she will have him buried in all honor. It is what he deserves.

She then walks over to Orochimaru's body, staring at him with contempt. She checks him over, assuring herself of his death. Part of her fears that he'll wake and bite her, flooding her veins with venom, but he is still and quiet in repose. He is smaller in death too and a part of Sakura finds his crumpled body pitiful. She wonders if any will mourn him.

She seals him within the other scroll, knowing better than to leave him here for the scavengers. Sakura has no idea if he has anything on him that is of value, but she will not risk his body falling into the wrong hands. She's sure that, considering the number of experiments he's conducted on himself, his body will be a wealth of knowledge for any passable medic-nin.

This done, Sakura stands, something within her going cold and remote. She doesn't have time right now to think; she knows she'll shatter. It's a luxury Sakura cannot afford until the war is over. Later though, if she makes it through, she's going to let herself fall apart and leave the pieces where they fall.

"Are those brought back by the Impure World Reincarnation still running amok?" Sakura asks, directing her gaze to the battlefield. She sighs, recognizing the Nidaime Hokage from the monument back home. "I guess that's a yes."

"They're probably tied to Kabuto instead," Ashura says.

"Or they function separate from either of them," Indra adds, his view more pessimistic than Ashura's.

"Regardless, we should probably try to assist in the efforts," Sakura says, looking over at Sai and Karin. They stand nearby, looking over the fallen bodies littering the ground. "Everything alright?"

Both of them nod genially.

"What is your plan of action?" Sai asks, deferring to her.

"You don't have one?" Sakura replies, genuinely surprised. He has a higher rank than her.

Sai shrugs, expression shifting slightly to something that looks uncomfortable. "You're a leader; you tend to have a plan."

"He's right," Karin chimes in, moving closer to Sakura. She loops an arm around Sakura's waist, offering her silent support. She bares her wrist to Sakura, nodding in permission when Sakura gives
her a quizzical look. Sakura bites down on Karin's wrist, her chakra pools filling completely. "So what is the plan?"

Sakura glances at Indra and Ashura, but they just smile back at her, delight sparkling in their eyes. "Well, here's the thing, we need to stop this Impure World Reincarnation," she says. "I believe it to be tied to either Orochimaru or Kabuto. Orochimaru is out of the question now, so it's most likely tied to Kabuto. If he goes, hopefully it goes." She glances at Karin. "Any word on Tayuya?"

"Tayuya has turned a good number of the Oto shinobi to our side," Karin says. "They've thrown the Oto forces into chaos. We've taken out their leader; removing his second-in-command will demolish whatever structure they have left."

"Then Kabuto must go," Sakura says, decisive. "I'm sure Ino has the task well in hand but perhaps we can speed his death along."

Karin closes her eyes for a moment, sussing his location in the chaos. "He's that way," she says.

"Lead the way," Sakura replies, shouldering the scrolls and tucking them away somewhere safe. She'll mourn her dead later; right now she has to save her people who are still living.

They are cresting a hill when the rumbling begins. Sakura frowns, searching around for the source. What earth elemental jutsu is being used?

"Karin?" she asks.

Karin shakes her head, frowning. "No one in the vicinity is using ninjutsu that could cause this."

Sakura yelps as the earth beneath her feet erupts and she leaps back, only to find that all of the ground around her is unstable. She does her best to gain solid footing, horror unfurling in her gut as white masses emerge from the earth.

The field is filled with White Zetsu clones.

Most phase through the ground, but the sheer number of them breaks apart the earth with their force.

Sakura bites back a scream as she remembers being consumed by these creatures, striking out at those near her with Sashimasu. They break apart at the impact of such a concentrated chakra strike, these clones not nearly as strong as the one that grabbed her at the Kage Summit, but more rise to fill its place.

"Karin! Sai!" Sakura calls out, reaching for her friends but she is cast adrift from them and they are obscured in a sea of white. "Indra! Ashura!"

Ashura and Indra flare their chakra, grabbing hold of her, even as their chakra burns away at the White Zetsus that surround her.

Their actions give her an idea. Sakura reaches for her chakra, restored as it is by that generous bite Karin allowed her, and coats herself in it, molding it into licking, consuming flames.

Under Shisui's tutelage, she's perfected her Fire Release Chakra Mode and it is exactly what she needs right now. The Zetsus around her melt away and Sakura dashes toward Karin and Sai, freeing them from their constraints. Sakura looks around, mind churning through information as quickly as
it can.
Zetsu.
Akatsuki.
Jinchūriki.
The rings.
Kaguya.

Sakura blanches, realizing at least part of Zetsu's plan.
"We have to get to Naruto!" Sakura shouts. "He's in danger. All the jinchūriki are!"

Karin and Sai don't question her or how she's come to these conclusions, they just leap into action, following her.

Already though, Sakura knows, at the back of her mind, they won't make it.

"Ashura, Indra, I love—"

"Don't say those words just yet," Ashura interrupts, gaze blazing.

"We'll say them back to you," Indra assures fiercely. "Just not when you're saying them as a goodbye."

Around them, the battlefield becomes strangely muted, sound dampened by the White Zetsus that litter the ground. With every moment, they grow more and more numerous, towering high above Sakura. They charge forward through the mire, though with every step the slough becomes more and more difficult. Sakura's feet lose traction as Zetsus emerge beneath her and Sakura goes sprawling, eyes cast skyward.

Above her, above them all, she can see a dome, a dome that stretches the entirety of the battlefield. It glitters in myriad colors, translucent and gorgeous. And, at the center of the dome, hovers a figure. Sakura cannot make out details, but the figure is starkly white.

Sakura blazes her chakra, looking to Ashura and Indra, her ever stalwart companions.

"We have to try," Sakura says, exhaustion flirting at the edges of her consciousness. She's never used nintaijutsu for such an extensive period of time. "Right?"

"Well, we've never met our grandmother," Indra says in purposefully light tones. "We're long overdue for a family reunion."

"We're with you, Sakura," Ashura says, "every step of the way."

"Thank you," Sakura says, voice soft. She manages to keep her hands from shaking, but it is a close thing. "Let's go."

Sakura digs herself free of the White Zetsus that threaten to consume her, forcing herself to move by sheer force of will. Fatigue drags at her, threatening to drown her. But she can't let it, not yet.

With every step, she draws closer to her goal, to Kaguya.
And then, then she can rest.

Finally.

She's just so damn tired.

In the end though, she doesn't have to make it all the way to Kaguya, for Kaguya comes to her.

The woman swoops down, stopping before Sakura. Sakura notices from the corner of her eyes that the White Zetsus nearby cease their activity upon her approach.

Sakura though is more concerned with Kaguya's appearance. For the most part, she appears pristine and alien, all ghostly white and ethereal. Except portions of her skin are jet black and one of her eyes is gold.

"So that's how you decided to handle your most fervent acolyte?" Sakura asks, bravado coloring her tone. She's running on fumes, but she comforts herself with the knowledge that her wit has yet to abandon her. "It seems a bit cruel."

"Father always did say that grandmother was a cold mistress," Ashura remarks idly.

"Explains the attempted filicide on both father and uncle," Indra adds in his most educated, condescending drawl. It never fails to piss people off. "Never was much of a loving person."

"Love?" Kaguya asks, her voice nearly as snide as Indra's. At least he comes by it honestly. "I gave them love; I gave my love to all of the unworthy humans of this planet. And how was I repaid? My sons—my sons—stole from me." As she speaks, the black portions of her body fade away, replaced by snow white. Her gold eye turns pale lilac, the predecessor to the Byakugan. "My most precious boon, my chakra. They were greedy, demanding so much of my body. It was and still remains my right to reclaim that which is mine." The seam at the middle of her forehead snaps open, revealing a blood red eye as her attention shifts to Sakura. "Speaking of which, this child has taken something of mine."

Sakura cannot move, mired as she is by her fatigue. It would be so nice to close her eyes and just rest…

Perhaps she will see Sarutobi-sensei in her dreams?

"What could she possibly have taken from you?" Ashura demands.

Kaguya flies closer, a sickening smile crawling across her lips. "You know the truth of it already, don't you girl? Or at least, you suspect it."

"What truth?" Indra asks, teeth bared as he throws out an arm in front of Sakura.

"She possesses a splinter of my soul," Kaguya says. "And I will collect what I am owed."

"The hell you will!" Ashura says, leaping up to strike her.

Kaguya grabs him easily, unconcerned. "Not to worry, dear grandsons. You are of my line which makes all that you are mine as well."

She reaches out, taking hold of Indra as well. They struggle, but they are unable to escape her grasp. She inhales deeply, hungrily, and Indra and Ashura begin to flicker, fading from Sakura's sight.
"No!" Sakura screams, breaking free of the trance holding her still. This is beyond her worst nightmare; she cannot lose them too. Never. "No!"

She coats herself in pure chakra, not bothering to make it any type of element in particular, springing forward at Kaguya. The chakra surrounding her burns away at the White Zetsus that threaten to encase her.

She summons her naginata, striking out at Kaguya's face with it. In her periphery, Sakura can see Ashura and Indra flicker in and out of her view and she is terrified of the moment when they won't flicker back into view.

It strikes Kaguya squarely in her forehead, passing through her red eye without leaving a wound. Sakura yelps as the weapon passes through easily, having placed too much strength into the blow. She stumbles forward, nearly falling against Kaguya.

Kaguya laughs and leans in, stretching out one long-nailed finger toward Sakura.

Sakura wheels, trying to correct her position but it is too late. Kaguya's finger touches Sakura's forehead.

Sakura blinks sleepily. She's so tired. It would be so wonderful to just lie down and sleep.

She'll see Indra and Ashura again if she just closes her eyes…

And her world turns sideways and all goes blissfully dark.

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Sakura looks around herself, taking in the branching chakra tree that is her body. Still, she is gladdened to see that the energy that makes up her leg is still present and whole. She's been without it before and she'll never take it for granted again. The green energy looks dull and nearly lifeless, its hum low and lethargic. But Sakura no longer feels fatigued, not here, not within the temple that is her own body. Time passes differently within the confines of this sanctuary; Sakura is master and mistress here.

"Sakura."

"Hello Inner," Sakura says, keeping her gaze focused on the chakra tree. She cannot bear to turn around to take in the reflection of herself. "Why am I here?"

"You know why," Inner replies, voice hesitant.

Sakura whirls around, looking at her inverse reflection. "We're Kaguya," she says, bile burning her throat.

Inner shrugs slightly. "Not quite. You are not Kaguya, I am."

"But you are me," Sakura says. "You've said as much quite often."

"I am you," Inner replies and, as she speaks, her shape begins to change, becoming taller and more regal in appearance. She remains a figure sketched in black, a reverse composite of the being Sakura mere moments ago attempted to impale on Sashimasu. "But you are not me. It's a bit strange. Didn't you find it a bit odd that you have a separate personality hosted within yourself? I'm not merely another identity, I am a separate self; that is the reason we are able to overcome Yamanaka techniques. And, during those psychological tests administered by the Intelligence Division, I was able to pass undetected. We are more than one person."
Sakura blinks at the explanation, thunderstruck. "So how exactly does that work?"

"It began, as most things do, with Kaguya," Inner says, taking a seat and gesturing for Sakura to do the same. "I have her memories of a time long forgotten. It's…strange, but my mind worked differently then. I was not human nor did I want to be human; I was Ōtsutsuki.

"I came to this planet as the guardian of the God Tree here. I was tasked with cultivating the tree; taking the fruit once it consumed all the energy and life of this world. However, I became…intrigued with the inhabitants of this planet. Tenji was the first being to ever make me laugh. I was entertained by the life forms of this planet and I did not want my fun to end. I consumed the chakra fruit selfishly because humans amused me."

"And you became the Mother of Chakra," Sakura murmurs.

"Indeed," Inner, Kaguya, replies with a regal nod of her head. "The thing about that fruit though is that it granted me absolute power. I alone held all the power harvested from this planet. It was intoxicating, thrilling in a way I'd never experienced. Looking back, I can see that my emotive states prior to eating the fruit were blunted and suppressed, a side effect of being Ōtsutsuki. After eating the fruit though, everything was amplified, both my virtues and my vices."

Kaguya's face twists as she recalls her actions. "When I fell pregnant, I was excited to be a parent. There was something enthralling about the idea of creating something out of nothing. All the chakra in the world cannot do that, techniques draw on energy already existing, but childbirth creates from nothing. I thought it magical. That all changed when I gave birth."

Kaguya swallows, expression turning pained. "I was not a good mother, I can see that now. I felt entitled to my children, seeing them as extensions of my will rather than their own independent beings. My alien mindset combined with the thrall of chakra proved damning. My selfishness fractured my chance at a family and a life of peace.

"When I realized that Hagoromo and Hamura possessed chakra; that, in fact, they'd siphoned portions of my chakra from me by the very nature of their heritage, I became enraged. As I said, the exposure to chakra heightened all experiences of emotion. I returned to the God Tree where it all began, combining with it to reclaim what I thought was mine."

"You became Jūbi," Sakura says, keeping condemnation out of her voice. She tries to understand Kaguya's thought processes, but finds that she cannot. It is beyond her comprehension.

"I did," Kaguya replies. "And in doing so, I damned myself. See, I was made up of far too many parts: my Ōtsutsuki heritage, my actual sense of self, my sheer Will, those parts of me defined by the chakra fruit, and now the God Tree itself. It was too much for one body, even the body of Jūbi to take. In becoming Jūbi I fractured.

"Jūbi became an amalgamation of the strength and rage given me by the chakra fruit and the God Tree as well as a drive to destroy that was purely Ōtsutsuki. My Will coalesced into Black Zetsu. My sense of self was, at this point, reduced to a mere kernel and set adrift, not strong enough to take its own shape," Kaguya sighs. "You know already the tale of Jūbi and the origin of jinchūriki."

"So you are this sense of self?" Sakura asks, eying Kaguya uneasily.

"Yes," she replies. "I drifted endlessly for so long. I was so tired and so weak that it took centuries for me to gather myself together in a coherent way. I was still not strong enough to become an entity all my own as Black Zetsu was. So, I attached myself to an infant."
"Me," Sakura says, giving Kaguya a once-over. "Even before Jūbi, you were not a good person." Sakura catches the slight grimace that crosses Kaguya's face. "So why were you so supportive of me?"

"I grew up alongside you," Kaguya says, eyes filling with such pride and affection that it makes Sakura's chest hurt. "For the first time, I understood what it meant to be human. And Sakura, it is an absolutely lovely thing. And you are one of the loveliest humans there is. I experienced the range of emotions you experienced and realized how little I understood or felt as an Ōtsutsuki."

Kaguya's lips pull down in pain. "I experienced firsthand what it is to suffer. When I took on the poison that took your leg—Sakura, until that point, I had never truly experienced pain. Not in a way that could cause one to beg for the release of death. In taking the brunt of that pain and in experiencing your other sufferings alongside you, I have learned what it is to be the victim, the oppressed, the survivor. Until that point, I had always been the one dealing such suffering and I never once questioned it, because all were below me. I did not understand the true tragedy of loss, but I mourned all those who've fallen alongside you: Haku, Mitsubachi, Nagato, Hiruzen. You taught me the triumphs and tragedies of humanity.

"I learned what it is to feel joy and love, truly love. Sakura, you are made of love. You offer it to those around you so freely and it changed something in me at a fundamental level. As fragmented as I am, this is the most whole I have ever been in any incarnation. Sakura, you've given me the chance to be human and I can never thank you enough for that."

Sakura's view of Kaguya blurs as tears streak down her face. She's cried so much in the past hour, but she does not begrudge herself this. Instead, she just wipes them away as they fall and says, "So what do we do now? Kaguya, the one outside, wishes to become Jūbi once more. Black Zetsu took the Akatsuki rings I had, I'm guessing he gathered them all. And, like a fool, I called a Kage Summit and led the jinchūriki here like lambs to the slaughtering stable. I basically offered reincarnation and world domination to her on a platter."

"She would have figured out another way, even if a Kage Summit was not called," Kaguya says. "She—I am a stubborn and persistent individual. My guess is that this has been in motion ever since Jūbi fell."

"She'll destroy everything," Sakura says. "Destroy everyone. How do we stop her?"

"Allow me to merge with her," Kaguya says, stout and resolute. "I can give her pause; allow someone to strike her and end her."

Sakura stares up at Kaguya and says simply, "I'll strike her."

"You may not walk away from this fight," Kaguya, says, subdued. Her eyes are filled with a weighty sadness.

"You aren't walking away from this fight. You will either die or be suppressed by Kaguya," Sakura replies, throat constricting. "How can I allow you to make such a sacrifice if I am unprepared to do the same?"

"I made my choices," Kaguya says, lips twisting bitterly. "The moment I bit into the chakra fruit I was living on borrowed time. It is time for me to stop delaying the inevitable. I've caused countless lifetimes of suffering and death with my poor decisions. You do not have to take the fall for me."

"I won't let you shoulder this burden alone," Sakura says, taking her hand and squeezing. "You'd do —" She thinks about her leg. "You've done the same for me. It'll take the both of us to fight."
Kaguya nods, cupping Sakura's cheek. "You've grown so strong, my lion heart. I am so proud to know you."

"Thank you," Sakura says, grasping Kaguya's hand hard to bolster herself. "Let's do this."

Still, Kaguya hesitates.

"If you survive this...I do not think you'll be able to see Ashura and Indra any longer. It was my influence that allowed it. As a spirit myself, my ability to see my ilk leaked over to you. With me gone..." Kaguya trails off.

Sakura swallows against the burning, tight sensation in her throat. She's consigned herself unto death; as a ninja, it is the simplest and most difficult of assignments. She completed it as a genin when she faced off with Gaara. Death does not bother her, she greets it as, well, perhaps not a friend, but as an uneasy acquaintance.

But to live on, without the presences of Indra and Ashura...Sakura's mind flashes to Ashura's brash gallantry, Indra's quiet, steady regard, soft-spoken stories around a fire, moments of breathless, heaving laughter and heartbreaking sobs and gentle, quiet tranquility. She thinks of Indra's mellow, beatific smiles and Ashura's unrestrained, wild grins. Ashura is her sun, keeping her warm and holding her gaze to the sky. Indra is her gravity, keeping her grounded and offering a solid shelter. Together they center her, balance her.

Who is Haruno Sakura without Ōtsutsuki Indra and Ōtsutsuki Ashura?

Does she even want to continue to be Haruno Sakura without them?

She contemplates this second darker and morbid question for scant seconds before coming to her answer.

Yes. She wants to live, despite the sacrifices, despite the loss of her leg and the likelihood of losing Ashura and Indra. She has yet to fulfill her dream; yet to witness her friends fulfill theirs. And she knows that Indra and Ashura want her to live, regardless of whether she can see them or not.

Losing them will be so much worse than losing her leg; a visceral phantom ache that will never fade, but Sakura knows what is at stake.

Kaguya, Inner, the entity that has been with her the longest of all, watches her with empathy.

Sakura bites her lip until it stops quivering, balling her hand into a fist. "I am ready," she says, eyes flashing.

If it is the last thing she does, and it may very well be, Sakura will spell Kaguya's doom, even if it means her own.

Hell hath no fury like a woman ready to lose everything, even herself.

Sakura opens her eyes, tightening her grip on Sashimasu. Around her, the world is still and silent, there is only her and Kaguya. She does not know the fates of her enemies, of her friends, of Indra or Ashura, but she cannot concern herself with those thoughts and doubts.

She feels empty, lesser in some way. She knows she is still a whole person, but she is used to sharing her body with another presence. There is a lightness where Inner Sakura used to be.
"How are you still standing?" Kaguya snarls, face twisting into a grotesque pantomime of Inner Sakura's. She has none of Inner Sakura's humanity. Her face slackens before turning to a smirk. "No matter, you won't be for much longer. Enjoy your last moments, human, before you submit to what you were always meant to be."

Sakura ignores her words and focuses on Kaguya's movements, shifting her weight to the balls of her feet. She waits to strike, watching for a sign.

She does not have to wait long.

Kaguya rears back, bringing a hand up to her third eye. "What?" she says, voice cracking in a volatile combination of fear and rage. "It can't be—how?" Her hands fall away from her face, listless at her sides. "Sakura, now!"

Sakura is already in motion, dredging up all of the strength she has left within herself for this one last attack. She knows already that this is her final move, she has nothing left in her beyond this. Sashimasu's blade flares bright green with the force of Sakura's resolve.

Her movements are a bit awkward with the damage done to her prosthetic by Orochimaru, but she throws herself forward. Sakura raises Sashimasu above her head, slashing down at Kaguya. Kaguya remains still, staring up at her with the slightest of smiles.

Sakura doesn't hesitate, even as bile and tears threaten to overtake her.

She's about to kill her oldest friend, her closest confidant.

And she cannot bring herself to regret it, not with all that is at stake.

Sashimasu connects with Kaguya's collarbone and Sakura jerks the naginata to the side, dragging it through flesh and sinew. She pushes chakra through her prosthetic, releasing the knife positioned within the foot section of the prosthetic. She presses her foot along the tendons behind Kaguya's knees, slicing through them. Kaguya slumps to the ground, held up only by Sashimasu lodged in her, and winces, but she doesn't cry out, merely looking up into Sakura's face, affection shining in her eyes.

Saline drips down Sakura's face, dropping in fat tears onto Kaguya's face. Kaguya regards her warmly, no pain showing in any of her three eyes. She reaches out with a shaky hand, pressing a hand to Sashimasu. It is lodged beneath her collarbone.

Sakura didn't even realize that she stopped moving Sashimasu until Kaguya touches it.

"Finish it, lion heart," Kaguya says wetly, before breaking into a coughing fit that ends in her spitting up blood. "I know it's hard. I know…I know you're tired. Please, finish it and live well."

"I'm sorry, Inner," Sakura says, chest heavy with the weight of she's about to do.

"Don't apologize," Kaguya says, wrapping her other hand around the shaft of the naginata. "Now end what I began centuries ago."

Sakura nods, levering Sashimasu down toward Kaguya's heart. Her arms ache with the exertion of it, but she continues to cut, feeling as she does so the way that Kaguya's chakra paths break and fall apart with every cut.

Sakura can feel Kaguya dying, Inner keeping her body from healing.
It is barely more than a gurgle, but Kaguya manages to force out the words, "Halcyon days."

Sakura nods, yanking Sashimasu free with a sickening squelch and, with only the briefest of hesitations, spears Kaguya through her third eye.

Sakura screams herself hoarse and voiceless at the unfairness of it all, the burden she never wanted to take on but was forced to shoulder because there was no one else.

Just her.

Kaguya falls back, hitting the ground still coated in White Zetsus. The shimmery barrier surrounding the area begins to come down and the White Zetsus begin to dematerialize, falling apart without a Will to guide them. And, as the White Zetsus disappear, the people who were absorbed reappear, no worse for the wear.

But Sakura is oblivious to all of this.

For Sakura has overextended herself in all ways. Her prosthetic collapses from beneath her, unable to support her weight after all of the damage it has taken. Sakura pitches forward, crumpling over Kaguya. Sakura blinks blearily, feeling the warmth that still lingers in Kaguya's dead body. Her gaze blurs with tears and Sakura shuts her eyes, falling into the welcoming dark abyss.

Maybe now she'll dream of those she lost.

Sakura wakes in a makeshift cot, surrounded by a cacophony of sounds. As overwhelming as it is, Sakura is glad of it, remembering all too well the quiet that came of the White Zetsus and Kaguya.

Kaguya.

Sakura lifts her hands, pressing them hard against her aching eyes. She aches with a loss greater than the phantom pains that plague her leg, as she is reminded of Sarutobi-sensei and Inner's sacrifices. She isn't even sure if anyone else was lost in the war or even if the war is still going on.

Sakura sits upright at that thought, eyes darting around the room. She's in a tent filled with cots and medical equipment, the scent of antiseptic disinfection heavy in the air. There are numerous other patients filling the beds and medic-nins bring even more in, all in a flurry of motion.

She shifts the rough blanket off of herself, making to stand. She cannot bear to lie about, useless and inactive, not with all the thoughts crowding her head. Sakura pauses when she realizes that she has no prosthetic on.

Sakura casts her gaze around the area, grabbing the crutch left for her, leveraging herself off of the cot. She takes a look at all of the people in the tent, alive and hale but no one she really recognizes outside of acquaintanceship, before slipping out the back.

The tent, it turns out, is set up in the middle of what appears to be a relief camp. Sakura sees people from all of the shinobi nations and even some from Oto moving around with purpose. She isn't sure how long she's been out, though it is currently approaching late evening, but she doubts it has been long.

After all, they appear to still be sorting the alive from the dead.

Sakura swallows, looking at the shadowy fallen, before casting her gaze away. She cannot bear the weight of more loss, not right now. Later, once she's reconciled the events that just transpired,
she'll be able to do so. But not now.

She turns, leaving the camp grounds. No one notices or stops her, a sentry system has yet to be organized and posted. Everyone is just relieved to be alive and free of the war.

Sakura moves further and further away from everyone, isolating herself so she can ruminate.

Ashura and Indra weren't waiting for her when she woke up.

She understands her teammates not being present, hell, they might not even know where she is, but she is—was?—Indra and Ashura's anchor. They can find her anywhere.

If they weren't there when she woke, they weren't around at all.

Sakura cannot feel their presences, not the way she could when Inner was still a part of her. They, like Inner, are cleaved from her.

Forever.

Sakura ducks her head, biting her lip. She scouts out the area around her, finding a large rock she can perch herself on. She navigates to it expertly, even as her crutch skitters across the rock. Sakura seats herself carefully and lies on her back, looking up at the sky.

The stars are especially bright and clear, a reminder to Sakura of the beauty of the world, even in the midst of the horrors of war. The stars begin to blur, becoming abstract, beautiful swirls as Sakura begins to cry.

Her chest heaves with the force of her sobbing and she curls in on herself. Sakura turns to her side as phlegm clogs her nose and throat, coughing and hiccuping as she continues to cry.

She doesn't want to move, doesn't want think. She just wants to look at the stars and just be.

Sakura's glad that she's alive, she doesn't regret surviving, but she mourns those no longer with her; those she'll never see again.

At least, not in this lifetime.

"Sakura," Indra says.

"C'mon Sakura," Ashura says.

"No," she moans, voice hoarse and raw. "I'm dreaming."

"No you aren't," Indra says.

"Yes, I am," Sakura replies.

She yelps as she is suddenly lifted from the rock and pulled to someone's chest.

Sakura opens her eyes, looking up into Ashura's concerned face. "Ashura," she whispers, reaching out and touching his face. "You're warm."

His eyes crinkle upward with happiness as he laughs, full and boisterous and alive.

Sakura presses her ear against his chest, marveling at the strong beat emanating from his heart.
She scrambles out of his arms, looking between him and Indra, agog and awestruck.

"How are you here? Alive?" she asks.

Ashura shrugs, grinning.

Indra steps forward, running his fingers gently along the tear tracks that leave her face feeling raw. With all the crying she's done recently, she's a bit surprised the tear tracks haven't permanently etched themselves on her skin. "We're not sure how we came to be here," he says, keeping hold of her face. He seems just as awed as she is. "We awoke, human and whole, a little way away from where you battled Kaguya."

"Inner," Sakura says, closing her eyes. "She must have done something. She said I wouldn't be able to see your spirit forms anymore…"

"And now you don't have to," Ashura says, grabbing one of her hands. "We're here in the flesh."

Sakura glances between them, heart overflowing with love. They're here, fully and wholly with her. "I love you," she says. "You're my best friends in all the world. I wasn't sure how I was going to live without you but I was going to try. It would've broken something in me, maybe even killed me, but I would've tried. But now?"

She looks between them, unable to keep a huge smile from her face. She doesn't know if she'll ever stop smiling. The pain is still there, still weighty, but it is held at bay by her joy.

Sakura leans in close to Indra (she knows that he still has insecurities about coming second and being overlooked and she knows that Ashura won't mind), looping her arms around his neck. She goes up on her toes, smiling when Indra's hands settle at her waist. Sakura presses in close, feeling his quick intake of breath as her lips cover his. She marvels at his warmth and his taste, savoring him and his embrace.

Sakura pulls back after several long, indulgent minutes, looking up into Indra's flushed face and swollen lips. His smile is near angelic as he strums his thumb across her lips.

"I love you too," Indra says. "Sakura, you've been the catalyst of change in my life. All that I am now, all of my growth, started with you. You are the most wonderful person I've ever known and I look forward to every moment of our future together." His eyes go beyond her and his smile turns amused. "I believe that someone else has something to say to you."

Indra spins her around carefully keeping her balanced even as he gives the turn a flourish. Sakura giggles as Ashura catches her, giving her his most brash, overwhelming grin that indicates just how nervous he is.

"Fancy seeing you here," Ashura says, leaning over her, hands pressing against her waist. He lifts her up, perching her foot atop his.

"Uh huh," Sakura says, amused by his antics. "So strange."

He leaves one hand at her waist, moving the other to clasp her hand. He begins to dance with her, grin softening to a smile. "Sakura, I cannot believe how lucky we were to ever cross paths with you. So much of our existences was spent in limbo, a purgatory of sorts. And then you barreled into our lives, changing everything. You filled our world with color; made us understand the joys of living. We squandered our lives in our anger and pride; it took dying for us to even begin to understand what it means to live. I cannot thank you enough for that."
Sakura rolls up onto her toes, slotting her mouth across his. Ashura stops dancing, releasing her hand and pressing his hand to the back of her head as he draws her close. He lifts her clear off her foot, holding her close. It is so good to be held like this, to feel the strong beat of Ashura's heart beneath her fingertips.

_They're alive!_

When they part, both of them are panting. Ashura sets her down gently.

Sakura turns, grabbing Indra's hand in one of hers and Ashura's in the other. She pulls them down with her into a seated position. They sit closely together, all pressed together, reveling in the fact that all three of them are alive.

"So, you stopped Kaguya," Ashura says, curling his fingers through her loose hair. "What now?"

Sakura looks at the two of them for a long moment, drinking them in. Then, she redirects her gaze to the stars, twinkling down upon them. Sakura feels warm and whole. She's still more than a little lost, still mourning losses, but she knows now that she'll be fine.

Sakura has Indra and Ashura; she has her home.

"I don't know," Sakura replies honestly. "We'll figure it out together."

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**Chapter End Notes**

Notes: And there you have it! The end of an era. This story has been there for 2 degrees, 3 years of my life, and 4 moves. This story has grown alongside me and it is amazing to see how the progress that I've made in my writing. It feels good to be at this point and I want to say thank you to you all for reading.

All that's left is the epilogue wrapping up all the loose ends and seeing the aftermath of the war.

Thank you all for joining me in this adventure and here's hoping for many, many more!
Y'all. Y'ALL. It's time. Three years to the day from when I first posted this story as a short one-off; part of my returning love of the Naruto fandom. I had no idea then that halcyon days would become what it now is, but I certainly do not regret it, any of it. Through writer's block and school and stressful jobs and a couple of rewrites, the end is finally here. I've learned so much through writing this story and I am so glad to share this journey with you all. Thank you for joining me on this adventure and I hope you all enjoy this epilogue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The War, if it can truly be called that, ends as quickly as it begins. It's rather anticlimatic in truth, lasting a scant three to four days. The War is a culmination of years, decades, of build-up.

The boiling point.

It's over in a flash, though the aftermath lasts considerably longer.

It's so easy to destroy, but it takes much longer to rebuild.

Sakura swallows back the bite of bile as she collects another fallen body, examining it for identifying information. The boy, for he is truly just a boy, wears a Kiri headband. She gently lifts him, carrying him to the space designated for Kiri, laying him out with reverence before moving back into the field.

She is beyond thankful for the minor jutsu that Naruto created that dulls a person's sense of smell for she knows that her roiling stomach would revolt in earnest should she smell the stench of death that clings to the battlefield.

The Kages are currently embroiled in meetings, attempting to hammer out the finer details of the "What now?" question that lingers in everyone's minds. What comes after a war? What follows the immediate aftermath of survival? How do they go on living when they were prepared for death?

No one really thought this part through and Sakura knows that change is on the horizon. Whether that change will be good or bad has yet to be seen.

Sakura knows that, considering her role in the war, her role in the deaths of Orochimaru and Kaguya, she should be involved in these meetings. She attended the first few, just to recount her experiences as no one else was present or cognizant of the fight with Kaguya. She only informs Tsunade of her relationship with Kaguya as her Inner, obfuscating those details to the other Kages and focusing instead on her bond with the Ōtsutsuki brothers.

But Sakura is uneasy with the looks her account garners her from the Kages. There's an uncomfortable awe in the way that they watch her, for her part in eliminating a Sannin who terrorized each of their nations and her hand in the death of a goddess. Sakura is grateful for the fact that they are much more intrigued by Indra and Ashura than they are by her.
Their heroism is easier to understand than hers.

They are legends, their mythos defined in death and only enhanced in this second life.

And Sakura? She is a nobody from an empty, nobody clan. She is forgettable.

(There is a reason that the Haruno symbol is an empty ring; they are nothing in the grand scheme of things.)

Her actions were the result of luck, grit, and the sacrifice of others.

She is undeserving of any high praise.

So, she throws herself into working in the trenches with the other shinobi, cleaning up the battlefield and recovering the dead. Each of the fighters, even those who were enemies, will be laid to rest properly, with the burial style of their homeland. It's a thankless, tiring job, but Sakura is glad of it.

It gives her time to think, to even try to process the losses she's already sustained and the ones that she continues to discover as news of people's whereabouts is determined. Indra and Ashura understand her need to process and set about other work, giving her the space to be alone. They always come together later in the day, taking comfort in each other as they explore the new intimacies of their relationship.

She is unashamed by the tears she sheds during the process and it doesn't interfere with the work.

Sakura continues in this way until mid-afternoon when the grumbling of her stomach becomes too much for her to ignore. She stops, heading to the medical quarters and submitting to the comprehensive decontamination processes before moving on to the cafeteria encampment.

This encampment is mainly run by the Akimichi, though Sakura notices that there are several nin from each village serving here. It's a sign of the trust being fostered among the shinobi nations, to allow every nation to be involved in meal preparation.

The easiest battle is won without ever entering the battlefield.

(And Sakura has learned all sorts of dangerous, beautiful, and terrible things that can be accomplished with poison.)

Sakura beelines for the stew being served, a specialty of Kumo. She ladles until her bowl is nearly overflowing before taking a look around the room. There are not too many people here at this hour, but Sakura notices that Karin and Naruto are seated together.

She frowns at that, surprised that they are not with the rest of Team Seven. Without hesitating, Sakura makes her way over to them, pulling up a seat. Glancing between them, Sakura can see something haunted in their eyes. Then again, it's a look that she sees in everyone's eyes since the start of this War.

"Karin? Naruto?" Sakura asks, glancing between them. She places her hands over theirs. "What is it?"

"We found Tayuya today," Karin says, gaze averted. Sakura can feel Karin shake beneath her hand. "She…didn't make it."

"I'm so sorry," Sakura says, feeling her eyes smart. When will the suffering and losses end?
"Once you and I were separated, I was pushed into Naruto's vicinity and joined him in the fight," Karin says. "We were engaged with some of Orochimaru's experiments—the ones whose minds were broken and remade to make them slaves to his will. Naruto and I were handling it alright, though we were certainly being worn down. I was tired from the fight with Orochimaru and Naruto was weary from Zetsu's attempt to extract Kyuubi."

"We were doing fine," Naruto interrupts. "The blow wouldn't have—there's no chance I would have died from that!"

"One of the Oto nin had manifested the third form of the curse seal, she was about to land a blow on Naruto, but Tayuya intercepted and took the blow instead," Karin explains. "It was at that point that the sea of Zetsus completely overwhelmed us, pulling us under. We weren't sure if what happened to Tayuya, if she lived or died. We guessed at the outcome, but we hoped—" Karin's voice breaks as she begins to cry. "Well, we learned the truth today."

"Why?" Naruto whispers, eyes overflowing with tears. "Why? I would've been fine—"

"Tayuya was Uzumaki, just like us," Karin says, grabbing Naruto's free hand. "She was protecting her family."

Sakura holds onto the both of them, crying alongside them as they mourn the Oto general who dedicated her life to ending Orochimaru's regime of terror. Sakura doesn't know when the pain will end, but for now, she'll just cling to her friends as they all break apart together.

And together, they'll reassemble the fragmented pieces into something new.

It won't be the same—can never be the same—but that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Sakura sighs, leaning heavily against Indra.

"Are you alright?" he asks, wrapping his arms around her waist and taking on most of her weight.

"It's this damn prosthesis," Sakura replies, shifting her hips so that she keeps her weight on her flesh leg. "It's so clunky and heavy. I've been spoiled with the prosthetics from home. It's just inhibiting my movements and making my leg ache."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Ashura says, coming up behind her and ruffling her unbound hair. He presses a kiss to the shell of her ear. "We can't have the hero of the Fourth Shinobi War wandering around in pain. Indra?"

Indra smirks, lifting Sakura in his arms.

"Put me down," Sakura says, laughing under her breath. These moments of levity are what she lives for at the moment. They are too few and far between right now. "C'mon, this isn't funny."

Indra presses a kiss into her hair. "We aren't joking. You haven't been attending the Kage meetings, but we have. They know who they owe for their victory. You defeated the goddess who founded chakra; you have sway here."

"Plus, they all know you from your time spent traveling. Ōnoki may not be the biggest fan of you, but he's surprisingly a big fan of Indra," Ashura says, smile impish. "Apparently, he quite idolized Indra in his youth."

Sakura snorts, glancing up at Indra for confirmation. His longsuffering look speaks volumes.
Sakura laughs outright, burying her face in Indra's chest. Just imagining Ōnoki, such a strong-willed, serious man, fawning over Indra has Sakura in a near fit of hysteric.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up," Indra says, but his soft smile belies his words. Anything that can make Sakura smile has his approval.

"There's got to be better prosthetics available," Ashura says. "And if they aren't immediately available, someone should be able to get a prosthetist brought in and fit you anyway. You've got clout and I have no issue throwing our collective weight around to make you more comfortable."

Sakura laughs a bit at that, charmed by their insistence on her behalf. She wriggles out of Indra's grasp and grabs both of their hands, leading them off to meet with Tsunade.

It is nice to be taken care of.

They walk across the camp, Sakura valiantly ignoring the stares and whispers of those that they pass. For her own piece of mind, she pushes it off as awe about the Ōtsutsuki brothers. Though, overhearing their whispers about "the goddess slayer," Sakura knows they are staring at her, judging her.

"Ignore them," Ashura says in her ear, even as Indra turns a fierce glare to all bystanders in the vicinity. "They do not know how to handle living legends walking in their presence."

Sakura snorts, but squeezes Ashura and Indra's hands in silent appreciation.

With Indra and Ashura directing deadly looks to everyone around them, they make it to the Kage pavilion without further incident. It is well-constructed for the quick work, clean, functional lines constructed from the stone.

Sakura mounts the stairs, wincing slightly as the prosthetic digs into her thigh. Indra is immediately beside her, an arm around her waist as he takes on her weight.

"Indra," Sakura says in warning.

"What?" he asks, smiling down at her, eyes warm beneath his fringe. "I'm feeling weak; I need your help to make it."

"You're incorrigible," Sakura says with a huff, but she allows him to assist her up these stairs.

Sakura stares at the plain, polished doors at the top of the stairs, hesitating.

"Throw your weight around, god slayer," Ashura says, touching her shoulder.

She exhales, shaking out her jitters, and places her hand to the door.

The area beneath her hand turns blue, pulsing out through the entire door. It creaks open.

Sakura steps inside, bracketed by Ashura and Indra. She walks down the empty hall, entering into the room at the end. All of the Kages look to her as she enters, curiosity in their gaze.

"About time you joined us, Sakura," Tsunade says with a hint of a smirk. "We're right about to discuss the continuation of the contact program. You and Sarutobi-sensei were involved in writing up the original proposal."

"Perhaps Sakura can lend a hand with that after we discuss something else," Ashura says firmly, guiding Sakura to sit in one of the open seats.
"Is something wrong?" Gaara asks, assessing Sakura with concern.

"Yes," Indra says, crossing his arms and directing a gimlet stare around the table.

"It's just—this prosthetic does not fit well," Sakura says, resisting the urge to fiddle with her fingers. She looks between Tsunade and A, as the Kages who have the most renowned medic nin. "Do we happen to have other prosthetic leg models on hand?"

"I don't think we have any here," Tsunade says. "Perhaps we can contact Kyoto-san and have her travel here to get you fitted with something new."

"Kankuro would be able to assist you," Gaara says, leaning forward and bracing himself on his forearms. "He created Chiyo-baasama's hand prosthetic in her later years. He would jump at the opportunity to help—"

"We have blacksmiths here," Mei cuts in, casting Sakura a kind smile. "They are master artisans of prosthetics and, even more, they make absolute works of art."

"Art?" A snorts, shaking his head. "The importance is functionality. Kumo's medic-nin are experts in fitting prosthetics to an individual's specifications perfectly! Haruno-kun, please allow us to treat you to a new prosthetic; I promise you will not be disappointed."

"None can match the superiority of Iwa craftsmanship!" Ōnoki chimes in, leaping to his feet. "Our Bomb Brigade is the best in creating prosthetics that will handle well in the field!"

"Doesn't that mean that the Bomb Brigade is not doing its job well?" Mei asks, smirking at him.

Sakura watches as the Kages begin to squabble, each striving for the right, nay, honor, to offer Sakura their services. She glances between Ashura and Indra, taking in their unsurprised expressions. They expected this outcome.

Sakura's shoulders begin to shake with quiet laughter as she feels overwhelmed by the affection in the room.

She looks at the hidden smiles on the faces of the Kages, the enjoyment they get out of the banter. She thinks maybe, just maybe, this post-War peace will actually work.

Sakura closes her eyes, a weight lifting from her shoulders.

*Sarutobi-sensei, your legacy is upon us. Peace is achievable; it is within our grasp. I won't let it pass us by.*

"We're leaving soon," Tsunade says, eying the group before her. It is rather small, consisting of Sakura, Tenten, Itachi, and Kakashi. "We have all of our stopgap treaties written up; they'll last for eight months as we try to get everything sorted."

"How soon do we leave?" Kakashi asks.

"Within the week," Tsunade replies. "Reports from Shizune indicate that international trade among the civilian sectors has already picked up. We need to head back so we can start creating and enforcing new trade policies and infrastructure." She smiles, though it is lined with weariness. "We're in all new territory here; it's a brave new world. We have to ensure that Konoha flourishes in this uncertain aftermath."
"What of Oto?" Sakura asks. She pauses but, remembering what Indra and Ashura said of clout, forges forward, "What of Root?"

She catches the way both Itachi and Kakashi blink, a sign as good as a flinch in individuals as controlled as they are.

"We will find and destroy each of Oto's remaining strongholds and free those he held as prisoners and experiments," Tsunade says. "I'll examine the list of Oto spies you and Karin gathered and do what I can to assist them in settling wherever they choose. We'll rely on their and Karin's assessments of the other Oto shinobi to determine what should be done for them. We will do our best to do right by them; mitigate the damages that Orochimaru caused. It'll take months, years even, but we will do better by them than Orochimaru ever did."

"And Root?" Sakura asks, eyes flashing. "I understand they've been a part of Konoha since its founding, the shadow of Konoha's great legacy, but if we are to move into the light, there is no room for such a bloody organization. Now is the time to weed out Root."

Tsunade sighs. "It won't be easy."

"Good things never are," Sakura says. "Sarutobi—" Sakura steels herself. "Sarutobi-sensei is dead. With him dies the faulty structures of his generation. Perhaps, once, Root was a necessity—" Sakura cannot agree with that logic, but she'll concede this point. She wasn't there when Root was founded after all. "—but now we are breaking free of that mold. We can't continue running in the same circles any longer if we ever wish to change or grow. Root, with the way it abducts and breaks children to force them to become tools, has no room in the future we wish to make. Wouldn't you agree, Tsunade?"

Sakura holds Tsunade's gaze evenly, desperately hoping that she'll see Sakura's point.

Tsunade purses her lips, glancing among the others. "Well?"

"I agree with Sakura," Tenten says. "Konoha is strong enough to stand on its own in the light. Thanks to the efforts of Sarutobi-sama and you yourself, Tsunade-shishou, we are stronger than we have ever been. We do not have to fester in the shadows, living off the blood of innocents to survive. We can only thrive if we cut away the dead weight. Root is a parasite that must be purged."

"We can rehabilitate the Root agents," Sakura says, thinking of the stories that Ino and Shino sometimes share about their relatives in Root. She thinks of Sai, of his painfully honest, stilted overtures toward friendship. He is one of the sweetest, most genuine individuals that Sakura knows and she treasures every step he makes in integrating into social life. "Remove them from the active roster, foster them in capable families, and give them a chance to formulate their personalities."

"Sakura's eyes glint as a new purpose solidifies in her mind. "We owe them that much and more, for stealing away their lives."

Tsunade looks at Itachi. "Will the clans back this decision? Danzō has been a central force within the village since Nidaime's time. You know as well as I that the clans are resistant to change."

"Perhaps the elders are," Itachi replies. "However, the younger generation has shown itself to be quite progressive. Already the Hyūga, one of the most prestigious clans within the village, is splintering into the Jiyū as this generation refuses to bow beneath the clan's oppressive demands. If there were ever a time to depose such an individual as Danzō, it would be now."

"The key is to get the right people supporting the dissolution of Root from the beginning," Kakashi
says. His eye creases upward in a smile. "Sakura-chan would be a good choice. Her ghouls as well."

Sakura rolls her eyes. "Ashura and Indra do not appreciate you addressing them that way, Kakashi-sensei."

"It's why I do it," Kakashi says cheerfully, before he returns his attention to Tsunade, joviality replaced with a rarely seen solemnity. "So? Let's get started."

"Sakura, may I speak with you?"

Sakura glances up from her writing, meeting Gaara's gaze. She grins, immediately setting her documents aside. She was chronicling her different spy seals, accounting for those who survived the war and those who did not. It is not the easiest of tasks, but Sakura owes it to them all to do right by them.

"Of course, Kazekage-sama," Sakura replies, hopping to her feet.

"You're welcome to call me Gaara," he replies, a hint of asperity in his voice. It's an old argument.

"I'm not sure, Kazekage-sama," Sakura teases. "I'm not too sure I have the clearance for such liberties."

He snorts, offering her his arm. "If anyone has such a right, it is you."

Sakura takes his arm, squeezing slightly when they are suddenly encompassed in sand and transported them to an empty area outside the camp. Sakura glances around, quickly realizing that they are located on a cliff near the camp. She relaxes slightly at that knowledge, releasing Gaara's arm.

"You sure we should be out here?" she asks, looking over at him. She still stands an inch or two taller than him. "There are probably still enemies in the nearby vicinity."

He gives her a small smile. "I feel safe having the slayer of a goddess at my side."

Sakura laughs outright at that, shaking her head. She looks out over the camp far below, smile fading. "Is that what they are calling me now?"

"One of the many names ascribed to you," Gaara says, keeping his gaze out on the sunset. "Kankuro mentioned that songs are already being written."

"Sage above," Sakura mutters, somewhat horrified but also flattered. She shakes away the odd thought of her name being known and renowned among all the nations as she turns her attention to Gaara. "What were you wanting to speak of?"

Gaara's eyes cut her way for a moment before returning to the setting sun. Somehow, it burns less than looking upon her directly. "Ōtsutsuki Indra and Ōtsutsuki Ashura are the ghosts who you have seen since childhood, are they not?"

"Yes," Sakura replies. "Our bond has grown over the years and, after the showdown with their grandmother, they returned fully to the mortal realm." Sakura grins. "I suppose that means I've accomplished my dream of figuring out their mystery!"

"I suppose it does," Gaara says. There is a long pause. "Are you—" His brows furrow as he tries to
come up with the right words. "Are you happy?"

"Happy?" Sakura says, thinking for a moment. "Right now? No." She ignores his bewildered look as she continues, "Happiness is a transient feeling, here one moment and gone the next. The War—its cost—well, it leaves me unable to feel much happiness in the moment. And that's alright. The losses are still so fresh; this is a time of mourning."

Sakura takes a deep breath as she contemplates the Ōtsutsuki brothers. Warmth spreads through her as she is filled with the love that they share. "I am full of joy though," she says. "In the midst of all of the pain and anguish, I still feel joy. It's beyond the fleeting wiles of happiness. And I owe most of this joy to Ashura and Indra. Because of them, I know we'll weather these storms. Because of them, I'm already experiencing my halcyon days."

Gaara takes in the content, blissful smile on Sakura's lips and the way her eyes sparkle as she speaks. He exhales, running a hand through his hair. "You love them." Sakura hums an assent. "How long have you known?"

Sakura has to think about it for a while. "I liked them even before we officially met; I spent a good portion of my childhood trying to figure out who they were. Once I was put on Team Seven, I actually got to know them." She shrugs a bit helplessly. "How could I keep from caring for them more with every passing day? They cared for me, taught me, looked out for me, and even protected me when it was needed. They encouraged me to grow, to push myself beyond my boundaries. They became my best friends. I wouldn't be who I am today without them.

"As for when I fell in love with them..." Sakura hums, contemplating the question. "Well, I don't know if there was ever a moment where I necessarily fell into love. Falling implies something abrupt and jarring, but loving them is the most natural thing in the world to me. It's more like I walked into love with them. I think my romantic feelings for them started after I returned from my travels with Sarutobi-sensei. With every step I took, my love for them increased and deepened. I think that I knew, even then, that loving them was always going to be the outcome." Sakura scratches her cheek, laughing a bit self-consciously. "Sorry for rambling a bit there. Did that sound strange?"

"No, not at all," Gaara replies, giving her a soft smile. "They are very lucky to have your love."

Sakura grins impishly at that, levity lightening her expression. "Indeed they are! After all, I am the new incarnation of the Sage. At least, that's what one of the new tavern songs infers."

Gaara chuckles.

"What about you, Gaara?" Sakura asks, catching his hand in hers as she turns fully to face him. "Have you found your halcyon days?"

Gaara regards her for a long moment, his gaze heavy with emotion. "No, not yet, Sakura." He returns his focus to the camp, keeping a grip on her hand. "But I will get there one day, I know it."

"I'll support you as best as I am able," Sakura pledges.

"I know you will."

Gaara smiles, squeezing her hand once before letting go.

Sakura adjusts her new prosthetic, rotating her leg in small circles as the connections to her chakra coils snap together. She appreciates it as the work of art it is; the Mizukage-sama was not lying
about her craftsmen and their work. The prosthetic is made of bronze-toned metals, with scalloped-out metalwork arranged to make a design of a field of wildflowers.

She examines it for a moment longer before hopping to her feet and exiting her tent. The Konoha delegation is up and moving about, taking apart camp. They've been traveling for over two weeks now and today they should arrive back in Konoha.

Sakura joins the hustle to close shop, understanding the eagerness to return home. It hasn't been that long, just a few months, but Sakura feels like years have passed since she last saw Konoha.

Perhaps part of that is because Sakura wasn't sure she would ever be able to return.

"How long have you been up?" Sakura asks, taking a box from Ashura and sealing it into a scroll.

"An hour or so," he replies, pressing a kiss to her forehead as he adds another box to be sealed away. "Indra still sleeping?"

"Of course," Sakura says, laughing. "He still isn't used to having a body once more that requires sleep."

"He was always a late riser," Ashura says. "I always thought that was part of the reason he went off on his lonesome, so he wouldn't be woken by our mother and father in the morning." He winks at her. "He's absolutely beastly when he wakes up."

"That's because you try to wake him up by pinching his nose or throwing water on him," Sakura replies. "Anyone would act beastly if woken in that manner."

"She's right," Indra replies, voice raspy with sleep. He leans over Sakura, pressing his chin against the top of her head and wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "Mother always said you had dreadful manners."

Sakura laughs outright at their playful sniping. The banter is teasing with just a bit of bite. Sakura appreciates their open, casual displays of affection, a reminder of their presences alive and well. She's also glad to see that her friends and colleagues handle the Ōtsutsuki brothers' displays of affection so well too. They don't seem to mind at all.

"Morning, Sakura-chan!" Naruto calls, hustling over to her. "Indra, Ashura." He takes the scroll from Sakura, handing her a fresh one. "Ready to get home?"

"Yes," Sakura replies, hesitating before taking his hand. Something about him seems off. Strangely subdued. "And yourself?"

"Of course, Sakura-chan!" he exclaims, but his smile doesn't quite reach his eyes. "It will be good to get back and see everyone."

Sakura cocks her head slightly, wanting to press him. However, she restrains herself, deciding to wait until they return to the privacy of their apartment before confronting him about it. So, she squeezes his hand gently before letting go and bustles about to finish packing up camp.

It doesn't take too long to finish things out and they set off at a quick pace. Indra and Ashura fall into step with Sakura and Team Seven, engaging in somewhat stiff conversation. While Ashura and Indra have been around the team since its founding, they've never actually interacted. They were always bystanders, observers but never participants.

So there is a lingering awkwardness as Indra and Ashura know the team quite well, but they
don't know them as friends. They aren't sure how to interact with these people they've watched grow up into adults.

On Team Seven's part, there is an uncomfortable awareness that these strangers have been beside them throughout all of their years together as a team. It was one thing to know that, it is another thing entirely to be confronted with the living, breathing reminders of that fact. Sakura thinks they are also a bit uneasy with her romantic relationship with the Ōtsutsuki brothers, though they haven't said anything.

Team Seven hasn't dealt with any of its members getting a romantic partner, so this is all new territory to navigate.

Sakura does her best to smooth over the blips in the conversation. Sai, bless him, assists her as much as he can, though he sticks his foot in his mouth more often than not. She knows that relationships between Indra, Ashura, and Team Seven will build with time, but she wants to ease that transition as much as she possibly can.

Still, the hours of travel drag on and Sakura finds herself praising the Sage when they pass the sentry towers set about three miles out of Konoha. Conversation ceases as everyone picks up the pace, anticipation growing.

Sakura crests the final hill separating them from Konoha, catching sight of the bright red gates of Konoha. Her breath catches for a moment as she takes in the familiar scene. There are pockmarks in the road away from the gate, a reminder of the bombs once planted there. All in all though, this is the Konoha that she left behind during her travels.

There is an acrid taste in her mouth as she is reminded of the fact that she is not passing through these gates with Sarutobi-sensei.

At least, not with him alive.

Sakura is also worried about how she feels about seeing the gates. While yes, she is happy and relieved to see Konoha still standing, there is nothing much deeper there. She loves Konoha, will always love Konoha, but she isn't sure if it is still her home.

"Sakura?" Indra says, coming to stop beside her. She didn't realize she stopped moving. He takes her hand. "Ready to go?"

Sakura looks at him and beyond him to Ashura who has turned to watch her with a quizzical frown. Her heart lifts, concerns calming and disappearing.

Konoha—the physical location of Konoha—may no longer feel like her home, but these people, her people, will always be her home.

Her home hasn't disappeared, it has just extended beyond its former boundaries.

Konohamaru wakes four days after they lay his grandfather to rest.

Upon hearing the account of his grandfather's death, he immediately requests an audience with Sakura.

Sakura makes her way up to his hospital room, trepidation heavy in her heart. She knocks on the door frame as she enters, meeting his dark eyes. His gaze, so like his grandfather's, nearly staggers Sakura and she has to fight the prickling of tears.
"Sarutobi-san," Sakura greets, moving into the room. Her eyes skirt over him, unwilling to meet his gaze after that initial reaction. "It is good to see you well."

Konohamaru's lips twist slightly at that. "I'm not sure if I would call myself well," he says, self-deprecation clear in his voice. "But I am happy to be awake and alive." He looks at her, curiosity clear in his hollowed face. Spending over a year in a coma has a high toll on the human body. "I hear it is in large part thanks to you."

"I wouldn't say that," Sakura says. "I'm sorry for the circumstances surrounding your wakening."

"It isn't your fault," he replies. "I can hardly believe that I've lost half of my team, over a year of my life, and now my grandfather…well, it is a lot to take in. I do not think I've really processed it yet."

"Why did you call me here?" Sakura asks. Truthfully, she was expecting him to lay the blame at her feet. Whether it was earned or not does not matter.

Konohamaru squirms in his bed a bit. "Well, this may be an odd request, but jiji and I were not the closest in his later years. We certainly loved each other, but, once he stepped down from being Hokage, he took on responsibilities as a diplomat. There was a brief window of a few months after his return to Konoha where we spent a good deal of time together, but then we encountered Oto—"

His lip trembles for a moment as his rate of breathing shortens. Sakura reaches out, rubbing circles into his frail shoulder. His jaw firms after a moment.

"We encountered Oto and I was left comatose," Konohamaru says. "And now, apparently, he is gone. I didn't even have a chance to attend the funeral."

"I'm sorry," Sakura says, for lack of anything better to say.

Konohamaru shakes his head. "Again you apologize. You are not at fault for the unfortunate circumstances of time. I only wish to…would you be willing to share stories of jiji with me? You were with him in his last few years, even his last few moments; would you share those memories?"

"Of course," Sakura says, voice thick with emotion. It is good to be reminded of Sarutobi-sensei's significance to others. He didn't just matter to her. She is not the only one mourning him. "Well, I suppose I should start at the beginning, when I first met him one-on-one. I was still attending the Academy and I was in sore need of books on the Sage of Six Paths."

"The Sage?" Konohamaru asks, confused. "What about him?"

Sakura chuckles. "Well, less him and more his sons. You see, I saw dead people. Well, two dead people to be exact."

"Move in on my signal," Tenten's voice crackles over the headsets. "Daisy and Aster are nearly done with their fūinjutsu."

Sakura nods, narrowing her eyes in contemplation as she regards the shabby, nondescript building that hosts Root. Her hands are a bit damp with anticipation, but they do not shake with nerves which she counts as a blessing. They are so close to purging the poison that is the Council of Elders; Homura and Koharu have been strong-armed into retirement.

The only one left in their unholy, sanctimonious trinity is Danzō.

By far, the most dangerous of the bunch.
Sakura glances back to her squad, taking in Indra, Ashura, and Sai's faces. Her heart races as she is confronted with the fact that they may not walk away from this unscathed.

Sakura isn't sure she can take anymore loss.

"Ugly," Sai says, calm as he grabs her forearm. "My seal…"

"Show me your tongue," Sakura says quickly, touching his face and pulling out a paintbrush. Her fūinjutsu is not nearly on Karin or Naruto's levels, but she can make do if Sai's life is in danger. "Quickly."

Sai opens his mouth, sticking out his tongue. Sakura squeezes Sai's jaw involuntarily before releasing.

The seal—Root's seal—is gone. The thick black lines that held Root members loyal under pain of death have completely disappeared, leaving Sai's tongue a healthy pink.

It is as if it never existed at all.

Sakura taps her headset. "Gladiolus," she begins. "Celandine's seal disappeared. How should we proceed?"

There is dead air for several long, precious moments. Then Tenten's voice comes through once more, "Enter with caution. Celandine, lead your squad to Danzō's office and report."

Sakura follows Sai's lead as they approach the entrance of the building. The door opens to Sai's touch and they move inside, eyes roving for any threats.

None present themselves.

In fact, they see no people whatsoever as they make their way unimpeded down multiple flights of stairs.

When they reach the bottommost floor, Sai hesitates, fingers clenching into fists. Sakura places her hands over his, waiting until the fine tremors cease.

"Would you like me to enter first?" Sakura asks in a low voice, watching Sai with concern. Sai has not spoken much about his time in Root under Danzō, but Sakura knows Danzō was a cruel and merciless master.

"No," Sai replies, releasing her hands. "I will handle this, Ugly."

Sakura nods, taking up her naginata once more. Sai pulls out a scroll, scrawling a handful of rats onto it. The ink rats leap free of the scroll and slip beneath the door. They wait for several moments before Sai nods.

"There is no one alive within that room."

Sai pushes open the door, stepping inside the dank, dim office. It is spartan in nature, completely devoid of personality.

Danzō's body is slumped over the desk facing the door.

Sakura hears Ashura begin to report to Naruto of their findings as she approaches the body at the desk.
In life, Danzō was a formidable, intimidating presence, but now…

Well, Danzō appears small and peaceful in death.

Sakura looks him over, catching the remains of foam around his mouth. His death was not a pleasant one, but then, death by poisoning never is.

She pulls on her gloves, lifting his head slightly to pull free the sole piece of paper on the desk. Sakura examines the precise, military lettering, surprised at the artful tone to the writing:

_The roots were needed_

_Fed by blood in the shadows_

_Now, the sun returns._

Sakura passes the note to Sai, setting about sealing Danzō's body in a scroll.

"This is," Sai begins, tone rising in ire. Sakura turns to him, watching with concern. She's never heard him raise his voice. "It is unacceptable! How dare he kill himself like this? It's so…it's so…"

"Cowardly," Indra says, disgust clear.

"There is no justice in this type of death," Ashura says.

"Danzō knew he wasn't going to survive," Sakura says. "As someone so used to being in power, he couldn't handle the idea of fading into obscurity. Perhaps he believed that suicide was the only death afforded him that would give him a modicum of control."

"He knew he wouldn't fit into this new world," Indra says, glancing over the note.

"And he refused to apologize for the atrocities he committed in the comfort of darkness," Ashura adds, setting about systematically ransacking the room.

Sakura rubs Sai's shoulder, standing beside him. Sai stands stiffly for a bit, processing everything that has happened and undoubtedly mourning the losses he experienced at Danzō's hands. Sakura stays with him, wondering how she would feel in his shoes, if Orochimaru ended himself in this manner rather than dying, in part, by her hand.

"I'm sorry, Sai. This isn't a very satisfying resolution to your time with Danzō," Sakura says softly, watching with unseeing eyes as the other squads flit in and out of the room as they dismantle Root's headquarters.

Eventually, they will need to figure out where Danzō sent the other Root members. Sakura hopes that they were not killed in one last, vindictive attempt for power on Danzō's part. Sakura thinks there is a good chance the other Root agents are still alive.

Most of the fight and drive went out of Danzō when they buried Sarutobi-sensei. His passion extinguished as was his greatest rival.

Sai turns, awkwardly wrapping his arms around Sakura in a hug. His grip is too tight and his body is tense with unease, but Sakura holds him in turn, trying to offer him some sort of comfort.

"I'm not happy with how it ended," Sai says into her hair. "But I will survive. I will survive and walk in the sun." He pulls back slightly, regarding Sakura seriously. "Do you believe I can step out of the shadows, Ugly?"
Sakura smiles, cupping Sai's cheek. "You've been walking in the sun for years now, Sai. You'll be just fine."

"What are these?" Sakura asks, putting a handful of papers on Tsunade's desk.

"You can read," Tsunade replies, not even glancing up from the scroll she is looking over. "Those are your reward for your service."

"Reward?" Sakura asks tightly. "These are deeds to a considerable amount of land."


"What?" Sakura squeaks, before clearing her throat. "What does that mean?"

"Konoha possesses a sizable amount of unclaimed forested lands. When new shinobi clans are settled and brought into Konoha in an official capacity, we make them an offer of land for them and their descendants. It is an investment upon the part of the village for its future."

"But I possess no kekkei genkai or hiden," Sakura protests. "A clan of one is not very impressive."

"Clan of one?" Tsunade asks, arching a disbelieving brow. "Isn't it a clan of three now?" Sakura flushes. "I wouldn't be surprised if those Ōtsutsuki brothers choose to adapt your clan name and symbol; what with the legacy that Kaguya left them."

"We—I can't promise children," Sakura says, face hot with embarrassment. "We haven't even discussed—"

Tsunade raises a hand to stop Sakura's stammering. "I didn't ask. That is a private decision between you and them. I am just explaining the usual reasons that lands are distributed. Your case is, as usual, quite unusual.

"I know that the work you and Sarutobi-sensei did abroad laid the foundation for the peace that we have now. You took part in eliminating two of the greatest threats Konoha has faced: Orochimaru and Kaguya. While I did mention to the various Councils that the Ōtsutsuki brothers were joining your clan, that was not my reason for awarding you these lands. You have more than earned these lands. Besides, if things go according to plan, those empty lands will stay empty anyway. Take them and do with them as you please."

Sakura sighs, picking up the papers once more. "Thank you, Tsunade-sama."

"I look forward to seeing what you choose to do with these lands," Tsunade says with a smirk. "You always manage to surprise me."

"Did you ever imagine you would be here, like this?" Sakura asks, folding her hands across her stomach as she stares up at the stars.

"What do you mean?" Ashura asks, raising his head slightly to glance her way.

"That we would be here like this," Sakura says. "That the two of you would reconcile. That we would be together. I still can't believe that I get to wake up next to you every day and feel your warmth, listen to your heartbeats."
"I am grateful for every single day we get to spend with you. I have felt more alive in your presence while I was dead than I ever did during my former life. I am grateful for every breath I take now in this new life," Indra says, lacing his fingers through hers. "In my former life, I would have never imagined reconciliation with you, Ashura. Now, I cannot imagine my life without your presence." He smirks, levity entering his voice. "It would certainly be quieter."

Sakura rolls her eyes at the ribbing, but, realizing how lighthearted it is, she leaves it be. Ashura seems to realize the same, saying, "I hoped for reconciliation, both in life and death. I didn't think it was likely to ever come true though. We ran through so many cycles of following around our descendants and it always ended the same way." His lips purse as he reminisces the turbulent past before his eyes clear. "Nowhere in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine you Sakura."

"Oh?" Sakura says, trying not to feel stung.

"My imagination pales in comparison to the reality of you, Sakura," Ashura says, propping himself up on an elbow and running his free hand through Sakura's unfettered hair. "You are an absolute force of nature, Sakura. You swept into our lives—deaths—and broke a ceaseless cycle of pain and anguish. Our descendants live in peace now, just as we do. I always thought that Indra and I would fade away into nonexistence upon resolving our issues, but the reality is immensely better. I was consigned to oblivion, but life with you is far more pleasing."

"Well," Sakura huffs under her breath, face flushing from their praise. "I never thought about what came after, not really. Before, the focus was on surviving each mission, ensuring the strength of Konoha, but now?" Sakura stares up at the twinkling stars, so distant from them and yet so bright. "Konoha is establishing peace among the different nations. Akatsuki, in its current state, is disbanding. Orochimaru and Kabuto are dead and gone. The last strongholds of Oto are being dismantled as the victims of Oto are in the process of being rehabilitated and reintroduced into society. Danzō is dead at his own hand, no longer able to enact his machinations from the shadows.

"There isn't a high demand for a one-legged shinobi." Sakura chuckles. "Hell, soon enough, there won't be much of a demand for shinobi in general. Tsunade-sama is in the process of overhauling the Academy so that students are learning to be more than just killing machines. These children will be trained in ways to use chakra in trade, in healing, in anything but killing." Sakura sighs. "These are good changes, necessary changes if we are to ever truly be at peace with our neighbors, but it feels a bit like the world is narrowing in a sense. I've been trained from childhood to be a tool wielded by Konoha. Who am I in a world where such tools are obsolete?"

"You, my dear, are anything but obsolete," Indra says, pressing up out of his reclined position so that he leans over Sakura. "The world is changing, in no small part thanks to your efforts. Change is terrifying, but it has its benefits." His smile is sultry as he bears down on Sakura, his hair tickling her face as he kisses her senseless. After several long, heated moments, he pulls back, brushing a thumb over her kiss-swollen lips. "You will forge your own path as you always have and we will be with you every step of the way."

"And who says your old skills won't be of use?" Ashura asks, sitting up on Sakura's other side, nudging Indra away from her face. "You are a skilled tactician and one hell of a diplomat; these skills will be vital in the upcoming upheaval that accompanies change. During times of turmoil like this, important things slip through the cracks and opportunists try to take advantage. We'll all need to stay on our guard."

Sakura bolts upright, mind racing with all of the different possibilities. "You're right. Once things are a bit more settled here in Konoha, perhaps after we get the Root and Oto rehabilitation projects
truly underway and stable, we can turn our attention to the other nations once more. Perhaps I can tour them as Sarutobi-sensei and I once did, assisting in fostering those inter-village bonds." Sakura grins, heart singing with a new, focused purpose. "We can cement our future into place, make it a reality."

"Yes, we can do all of that," Ashura says, smile fond as he cups her cheek. "But for now—"

His hand shifts to the back of her head as he bears his weight down upon her until she reclines once more. His dark eyes are intent as he takes in the pretty picture she makes.

"There are a few ideas I would like to make reality," Ashura says, voice filled with mischief. "Any complaints, Indra?"

"We're of a similar mind, brother," Indra says, reaching out to trace a light pattern across Sakura's bare arm. His touch is slow, measured, practically innocuous, yet Sakura is very, very aware of it. "Any complaints, Sakura?"

She shakes her head mutely.

The brothers exchange victorious grins that steal Sakura's breath away before Ashura is slotting his lips across hers, stealing her breath in a different, pleasant manner.

Her thoughts and plans scatter, screeching to a halt, but Sakura has absolutely no complaints.

"Sakura-chan, could I speak with you?"

Sakura turns away from the young Root operative that she is teaching to knit, meeting Naruto's concerned eyes. "Of course," Sakura replies, patting the boy's hand. "Is that alright, Kohaku-kun?"

Kohaku looks up at her blankly but, when she goes to stand, he catches her wrist. Sakura pauses, crouching beside him.

"I'll be back in a moment Kohaku-kun," she says gently. "Why don't you work on purling this line? I'll be happy to see your progress when I get back."

Kohaku turns his eyes to Naruto, narrowing his gaze for a moment before releasing Sakura's hand. Sakura stands, resisting the urge to ruffle Kohaku's hair. She looks at Naruto, cocking an eyebrow. "Ready?"

Naruto nods, leading Sakura into a different room of the building. With Yamato, Ashura, and Indra's assistance, the buildings on Sakura's lands were erected quickly. They're great quality; this one built specifically to house and assist the former Root members in their rehabilitation.

Naruto places a no-noise seal on the door and Sakura can feel Kohaku's chakra flare in alarm. She stifles a good-natured sigh, knowing that eavesdropping is undoubtedly part of Kohaku's former training.

They'll have to work on it.

"What's wrong, Naruto?" Sakura asks.

Naruto sighs, scrubbing a hand through the hair at the back of his neck. "It's—look, you know I love Konoha."
"Of course," Sakura replies, catching his hand. "Naruto, what's going on? Why are you so concerned?"

"It's just, things have changed," Naruto says, pulling free of Sakura's grasp and pacing the room. "Even before the War, I was feeling dissatisfied. Something was off, but I kept my head down and kept hunting down Orochimaru's labs. But with the War—with Tayuya—"

Naruto stops, eyes over bright.

"Things change, Naruto," Sakura says, trying to comfort him. "Our feelings, our relationships, our hopes, they all change with time and experience. So what exactly has changed?"

Naruto whirls, meeting Sakura's gaze solidly. "I don't want to be Hokage anymore!"

Sakura blinks at the outburst, processing his words. "Alright," she says.

"Is that all you have to say?" Naruto demands. "Why aren't you trying to talk me out of it?"

"Do you want to be talked out of it?" Sakura asks simply. He doesn't respond, but his shoulders slump. "That's what I thought. What brought this decision on?"

Naruto takes a seat, placing his head in his hands. "I started having my doubts when you came back from traveling with the old man. I realized that being Hokage was a difficult, isolating position. It's lonely at the top. And the mistakes you make can be the most haunting. Look at what happened with Orochimaru! You have to be impartial and politically savvy." He smiles at her. "And I am neither of those things."

"So is your reason not to pursue being Hokage because you're afraid?" Sakura asks, trying to understand.

"It isn't just that," Naruto says, gritting his teeth in frustration, "though that is certainly part of it. I wanted to be Hokage as a child because I saw the respect that the position garnered. If I could reach that station, then everyone had to respect me!" He sighs. "My reason for being Hokage hasn't evolved as I have. I'm just about the worst possible candidate for a politician; I have no social graces."

"Neither does Gaara, but he excels in his position as Kazekage," Sakura replies, keeping her tone even.

Naruto shakes his head. "Gaara is suited to the role; he has a passion for it. I think that I would go crazy within the first few months. It just isn't for me." He smiles slightly. "Besides, my dream has changed."

"Oh yeah?" Sakura says. "And what is your new dream?"

"I want to find the other Uzumaki," Naruto says, eyes sparking with determination. "I've been reading through Mito and mom's journals; they cover the fall of Uzushio. The Uzumaki clan fell apart and spread across all of the shinobi nations. Karin was raised in Kusa, Tayuya in Ame, and myself here in Konoha. Who knows what happened to the rest of the clan? Tayuya sacrificed herself for our family; I need to reunite us once more."

"That's an amazing new dream," Sakura says softly.

"I want to go to Uzushio and explore the ruins; see if there is anything salvageable there. Try to rebuild what I can," Naruto says. He meets Sakura's eyes head-on. "I want to know my mother's
Sakura envelops Naruto in a hug. "I'm proud of you Naruto. I'll do everything in my power to assist you. Have you told anyone else yet?"

Naruto shakes his head even as he wraps his arms around Sakura as he relaxes into the hug. "Sasuke's been wrapped up with that woman he's interested in, besides, he can be a bit short-tempered. I haven't told Sai because he's...well, Sai."

"And Karin?"

"Not yet. I didn't want to tell her until I was certain," Naruto says, pulling away and scratching his cheek. "She's Uzumaki herself. I didn't want to get her entangled in these thoughts until I could actually start laying out the plan concretely."

Sakura nods. "You should speak with her about it. I think she might want to join in your efforts; Tayuya meant a lot to her too. You're both Uzumaki, she should have a say in the restoration of your clan."

"Thanks Sakura-chan!" Naruto exclaims, sweeping her clean off her feet into a bone-crushing hug. "I knew I could trust you."

"Anytime, Naruto," Sakura wheezes, looping her arms around him in return. She pauses, cocking her head toward the door. It's completely silent, which is never a good sign. "Let's head back to the main room, Kohaku-kun is probably getting a bit fractious."

"Is that—?" Indra cuts off, shaking his head.

"What?" Sakura asks, turning with her arms full of groceries. "Who—?"

She stops dead, both in speech and step as she catches sight of a couple seated at a nearby restaurant.

Sasuke, for that distinctive hair cut can only belong to Sasuke, is seated at one of the outdoor tables, hand entwined with the woman's across from him. His smile is wide and open as he regards her with clear affection. The woman is still dressed in her work clothes, with a bandanna in her hair and a navy apron around her waist.

"Huh," Ashura says, placing a hand on his hip. "Who knew the kid had it in him?"

"Well," Sakura says, still reeling a bit from the shock of it. Sasuke and Ayame? She never would have predicted it. "I suppose it explains why he always consumed nearly as much ramen as Naruto and Karin, despite not possessing the Uzumaki constitution." She smirks. "And the fact that he doesn't really like ramen."

"Think that'll be a deal breaker?" Indra asks.

"No," Sakura says, with a shake of her head. "Ayame's been around since the beginning; she's seen Sasuke at some of his lowest points. Ramen not being his favorite food won't dissuade her."

"If she wanted someone who loved ramen, she would've pursued Naruto," Ashura says. He pauses, brows furrowing. "Think the Uchiha will kick up a fuss about it? She doesn't have the usual pedigree they go for."
"Itachi will raise all hell if they get in the way of his brother's happiness," Sakura says.

"The traditions of the clans are falling by the wayside. As they should. Pompous assholes," Indra mutters darkly. He is not a fan of the strictures put in place by Konoha's clans, finding them far too restricting. "The clans are already quite wary with the dissolution of the Hyūga in favor of the Jiyū. In a generation or two, the Hyūga will no longer exist. The Uchiha elders will not dare to incur the potential ire of Sasuke and the infamous Team Seven, for fear of a similar fate."

Sakura hums her agreement, watching as Ayame reaches out, cupping Sasuke's cheek. Sasuke leans into her touch, smile shy and bashful. Sakura turns away from them with a smile of her own, tugging at Indra and Ashura's hands.

"C'mon, let's leave them to their date. We've got some cold goods that will melt if we stay out much longer."

Sakura picks up the reports left her by the Academy teachers, taking a seat at the desk. She flips to the first report, reading through it with care. A slow smile creeps across her lips at the words written there.

It's been a few months since the Root operatives were reintroduced into society, attending courses at the Academy to assist in regaining their humanity. Truthfully, Sakura wasn't entirely sure it would work, but change is happening.

It is slow-going, yes, but things are improving.

The Root operatives take to the hobbies and tasks offered them like ducks to water, though it is much harder to get them to determine their likes and dislikes. Sai is heavily involved in the process, coaxing the repressed personalities forward with a patience and understanding that warms Sakura's heart.

Shino, Chōji, Sai and Neji have all moved into the homes housing the former Root and Oto operatives, doing what they can to assist in the rehabilitation process. Konoha has tracked down most of Orochimaru's labs thanks to Karin's information from the spy network and those who are willing are offered homes in any of the shinobi nations should they choose.

It makes for an interesting home life, rowdy and wild at times, but Sakura does not mind overly much. There are certainly moments when it gets to be a little much for Sakura (the former Root agents have no concept of personal space or social niceties and they have a pesky habit of popping in on Sakura unannounced), but she doesn't regret it for a moment. How can she, when she sees the tentative, fragile, but ever hopeful relationship blossoming between Shino and Torune, Ino and Fu, and countless others?

It does not take away the pain and destruction that Danzō's wanton lust for power caused, but it certainly goes a long way toward healing it.

Sakura flips through the rest of the reports, nodding to herself as she reads through them.

The non-Root students at the Academy are improving as well, for the most part enjoying the new curriculum implemented. They learn the applications of chakra outside of violence and survival, as they should. Sakura volunteers some time at the Academy on a weekly basis, connecting with the children who will one day inherit Konoha.

She thinks a future of continued peace is possible with these youngsters.
"Sakura-sensei!" a voice chimes from the doorway.

Sakura looks up from the paperwork, smiling at Miki. She is a civilian student, daughter to fish mongers and quite the loud, fearless personality. Somewhat surprisingly, she's taken to the young Root agents in her class and Sakura sees two of them behind her: Nana and Chihiro.

"What can I do for you?" Sakura asks, stashing the reports in her bag.

"Could you show us how to do bubbles again?" Miki asks, voice tempered just enough that it isn't quite a demand. "Chihiro really liked it!"

Sakura peers at the girl who tucked herself slightly behind Miki. "Is that true Chihiro?" Chihiro doesn't squirm beneath Sakura's gaze, but Sakura catches the way her eyes widen. Sakura stands, casting them all a broad grin. "Well, let's head outside! If Chihiro wants bubbles, she'll get bubbles!"

The sweet, hesitant smile that Chihiro gives Sakura in return is all the thanks that she needs.

This, all of this effort, is more than well worth it.

Sakura grabs three mugs of cider, placing a coin in the vendor's hand in thanks. She weaves through the crowd, nodding to those who raise a glass her way. Ashura and Indra are seated at one of the tables set up on the periphery of the celebration, left alone by the revelers.

"Aren't you two quite a pair of wallflowers?" Sakura asks, arching a brow and casting them a wry smile.

"Just waiting on our sun to arrive," Ashura says.

"Wow," Sakura says, shaking her head. "That is not one of your best lines."

Ashura shrugs, smile still wide and genuine. "Well, not all of them can be as perfect as you are."

Sakura snorts, chuckling when Indra smacks the back of Ashura's head. She takes a seat across from them, passing them their cider. "This is your first time having Akimichi spiced cider; prepare your taste buds for an absolute pleasure."

"This isn't the first time we've had juice from apples," Indra says with a discrete roll of his eyes. "Frankly, I think you're—"

"Just drink it," Sakura huffs. "You are so dramatic. It's easy to see that the Uchiha and Hyūga get it from you."

Ashura laughs raucously at this, unimpeded by Indra's death stare. "Well, Sakura reads you like an open book!" He pauses, glancing down into the steaming mug of cider. "Though are they really the Hyūga anymore? Shouldn't we call them the Jiyū?"

"Well, if things keep progressing as they are, there probably won't be any Hyūga within the next generation or two," Sakura says. "Hinata has really started a revolution for her clan."

"And she certainly carries on Indra's legacy of theatrics," Ashura says, still chortling. "The way she stormed into the Council of Clans and demanded a seat…Well, she does her forefather proud."

Sakura smiles, remembering the sight of Hinata staring down the Council defiantly, daring any to question her right to be there. If for nothing else, Sakura is glad that she's received an honorary seat
on the Council for that moment alone. The incredulity on Hiashi's face is emblazoned in Sakura's brain. Hinata argued ferociously for the rights of her people to join the Jiyū should they choose.

And nearly all of the younger generation willingly followed in Hinata's courageous footsteps.

"Well, if any of his descendants weren't dramatic, Indra would have to disinherit them," Sakura says.

Indra glares as the two of them burst into laughter, looking quite put out at the teasing. He pouts down at his mug for a moment before lifting it to his lips, taking a sip. His eyes go wide in wonder.

"Good right?" Sakura asks, cocking an eyebrow.

"Yes," Indra replies before smiling. "I don't know why I even bother. You are always right."

"Good for you to learn that so early on," Ino crows, looping her arms around Sakura's neck. "It reflects well on the survivability of your relationship."

"Gracing us with your presence, Poison Mistress?" Ashura asks, mischief clear in his eyes. "We're quite honored you deigned to join us."

"Oh please," Ino says, ruffling Sakura's loose hair before falling into the seat beside Sakura. "I'm not the big hero of the War. That's Sakura."

"You're the one who got the fancy title," Sakura replies, squirming a bit uncomfortably. "And you vanquished Kabuto singlehandedly. You're a pretty big hero in my eyes, Ino."

"Thanks Sakura," Ino says, heat rising to the back of her neck. "You're too sweet. Why are the bunch of you sitting on the fringes like this?"

Indra and Sakura exchange looks. "We aren't party people," they say at the same time.

"And I'm accompanying them," Ashura says, grabbing Sakura's hand and squeezing.

Ino rolls her eyes. "You are almost as bad as Chōji and Shikamaru. Go, make merry, dance! Tenten went through a lot of effort to get these harvest festivals started again and I won't let her efforts go to waste."

Sakura looks at the brothers, raising a brow in question.

"Sakura, will you do us the honor of dancing with us?" Ashura asks, yanking Indra to his feet as he speaks.

Sakura glances between them, the resignation on Indra's face, the excitement on Ashura's, and the deep, deep love beneath it all. "How could I say no?"

She takes both of their offered hands, shaking her legs as she stands. Her calves are wrapped in lines of sleigh bells, just like theirs. It's an old tradition recently resurfacing thanks to Tenten's efforts.

Sakura knows her history, knows that in the early days of Konoha that these bells were used in clan training to learn the art of stealth. A true shinobi possesses the ability to run and jump and cavort without letting the bells ring. They caught on among civilians and the bells became a part of traditional Konoha dances.

These dances and festivals fell by the wayside during the Third Shinobi World War, though Tenten
is doing her damnedest to bring them back.

"Have you ever done any dances like this?" Sakura asks, looking at the holm oak bastons in the nearby containers. She decides against them, not sure if she trusts herself to not get brained by one of the sticks as they toss them about. "Celebrate the harvest in this manner?"

"Nothing quite like this," Ashura says, casting his eyes around the enormous bonfires that encircle the dance area. "Though there were certainly dances." He returns his attention to Sakura. "Never attended one with anyone as pretty as you on my arm."

Sakura pats his hand, shaking her head at his words. The moment they embarked on this romantic relationship Ashura started up a ruthless torrent of flirting. He claims it is to make up for lost time.

"Well, I suppose I can say the same about you too!" Sakura says, smiling at the two of them. "I'm the belle of the ball with the two of you on my arms."

Sakura's smile becomes a smirk when she catches sight of the flush crawling up the back of Ashura's neck. He can dish it out, but he gets surprisingly bashful on the receiving end.

Indra looks around at the other dancers. "What dance are we planning to do? All of these dancers are in pairs."

"Well," Sakura says, drawing out the syllable. She hears the band begin to play a lively tune on sanshin, tambourines, tabors, and shawms. "I suppose we will have to improvise. Maybe try some sparring techniques?"

Ashura elbows Indra in the side, chuckling. "What's wrong, old man? Think you can't keep up?"

"More worried about you," Indra says. "You were always the clumsy one during training."

"Let's try the half-moon kata," Sakura says, mentally running through the steps. "I think that'll work with three people."

"Let's give it a try," Ashura says.

Sakura spins away from them, listening to the beat of the music as she begins to move through the opening steps of the kata. Her bells jingle with every step, further emphasizing the simple movements of the kata.

She whirls, meeting the gazes of Ashura and Indra as they do the same. She reaches forward with one hand toward the center of their circle and, as Indra and Ashura place their hands on hers, she begins the slow, steady steps around the circle.

Indra's eyes reflect the flickering flame, a softness there as he regards Sakura. Ashura's mischievous smile has gentled into something warm and lovely. Sakura's heart feels overfull with affection and love for them. She can barely believe that she is able to experience a happiness like this.

Sakura breaks away from them, spinning a couple of paces away. She faces them once more, runs toward them, and flips forward, utilizing a little bit of chakra to make sure she springs clear and high above them. Her bells tinkle merrily as she lands, turning to see them in action as well, grace and power in every one of their movements.

They move back toward each other and Sakura catches their hands in hers. They start the dance anew and Sakura says, loud enough that they can hear her, "You two are my halcyon days."
To anyone else, this phrase would be nonsensical. But Indra and Ashura know her, understand the significance. Their very beings echo with the sentiment, with that steady, consuming love, as they break the dance, pulling Sakura into a tight embrace.

"Congratulations Tenten!" Sakura exclaims, sweeping her off her feet in a tight embrace. "I had a feeling it would be you."

Tenten laughs, adjusting the Kage hat as it is knocked askew. "Thank you Sakura," she says, voice effusing pure delight. "I'm still reeling."

Sakura sets Tenten down, looking her over. Tenten wears the hat well, dressed in the shimmery gold robe of office. It is ostentatious and Sakura can understand why most Kages choose to only wear the official garments of office during only the most necessary of occasions. She shoulders the responsibility with a seemingly effortless grace, better than any other Kage that Sakura has encountered.

"You were born for this," Sakura says, quiet words almost lost in the chatter of celebration around them. She can tell Tenten hears her from the way her smile falls into a serious, contemplative look. "You will be the best Kage Konoha has ever seen."

"Tsunade-shishou has at least promised to stick around for the next year just in case that faith is misplaced," Tenten says, smoothing down the robe. She crooks a smile to Sakura. "And I have friends like you to keep me from running astray."

"I highly doubt you'll need the assistance but I'll be glad to help as I can," Sakura says, moving toward the table as she tucks her hand against Tenten's forearm. She gestures to the room around them. "Just look at this turnout; diplomats from every single one of the shinobi nations are here to see your inauguration."

"The peace affords us these opportunities to deepen our friendships," Tenten says, nodding to a passing dignitary.

"Is that what you call it?" Sakura asks archly. "I had no idea that friendship was what you had in mind while you were making out with Chōjurō."

"Hush," Tenten says, cheeks darkening in a flush. "That has nothing to do with this."

"Really," Sakura drawls. "Well, I suppose the rumors about Chōjurō demanding that he be the representative for Kiri this evening were exaggerated too. And Mizukage-sama was so impressed with his initiative…"

Tenten shakes her head, though her blush lingers a while longer. "Speaking of diplomacy, Sakura, I have a proposition for you."

"For me?" Sakura asks, drawing her gaze away from the crowd and focusing on Tenten. "And what would that be?"

Tenten pulls free a paper seal, the fūinjutsu on it the work of Karin. She presses chakra into it and the letters flare, encapsulating them in a bubble. No one will be able to eavesdrop. "You've made quite a name for yourself, both before and during the War," Tenten says, tapping the medal around Sakura's neck. Sakura doesn't care for it, for the accolades and awe that accompany it, but she understands the delicate political game afoot tonight. Konoha must show its might to its friends and would-be enemies, do what is necessary to prevent future strife. "We've fielded requests from all of the shinobi nations to have you visit. We've held off so far to give you a chance to recuperate, to
give Konoha a chance to refortify in the aftermath. It's been nearly a year now and it is time for us to turn our gaze outward once more.

"I'm asking that you consider taking on the role of an ambassador for Konoha," Tenten says. "You'll travel among the nations, both shinobi and civilian, working on our treaties with them and strengthening our bonds with their people." Her lips curl into a mischievous smile. "Of course, Ōtsutsuki Ashura and Indra will accompany you wherever you go. We wouldn't dare attempt to separate you three. What do you think?"

"I—I will have to discuss it with them," Sakura stammers, dumbstruck.

Her heart squeezes as she remembers the last time she traveled among the nations, accompanied by her teacher. That loss is a painful ache, but she thinks Sarutobi-sensei would approve. It is bittersweet, imagining continuing his work without him, but she will not be alone.

Sakura looks across the room, catching sight of Ashura and Indra standing with Naruto, Yugito, and Sai.

"Of course," Tenten says, squeezing Sakura's hand and releasing the seal around their conversation. "Take as much time as you need."

"Sakura! Hokage-sama!"

Sakura and Tenten turn as one, meeting the gaze of Kurotsuchi as she strides to greet them, smile wide.

"Sakura, would you mind terribly if I steal your Hokage away for a dance?" Kurotsuchi asks, eyes sparkling with impish energy. "I've heard tale of your dancing prowess, Hokage-sama, and I wish to experience it for myself."

Sakura bites her lip to keep from laughing. Tenten is a master on the battlefield, but a dancer she is not. Sakura doesn't quite understand how such a graceful individual can have two left feet on the dance floor, but she has suffered many bruised and, on one memorable occasion, broken toes while dancing with Tenten. "Of course, Kurotsuchi. Enjoy your dance."

Kurotsuchi leads Tenten away, something feral and hungry in her gaze. Sakura watches them go for a moment, cocking her head in contemplation.

"Huh," she says. "How about that."

"How about what?" Ashura says, leaning over her shoulder. Sakura gestures toward the dance floor where Tenten and Kurotsuchi are dancing. Actually, it looks like they are using a kata instead, just as Sakura does when dancing with Indra and Ashura. Ashura hums and Sakura shivers at the sensation. "Chōjurō will not be pleased by that."

"You may be surprised," Indra says, placing a hand on Sakura's hip. He points out Chōjurō who is watching Kurotsuchi and Tenten with an unreadable but intent expression.

Sakura leans back against Indra for a moment, sighing as the tension leaves her. "I have something to discuss with you both."

"Well what are we waiting for?" Ashura asks, grabbing her hand and spinning her away from Indra. "We've been trying to figure out how to get out of here for the past hour! You look quite delectable in that dress."
"Ravishing in fact," Indra agrees, catching her other hand. "Let's go."

Sakura follows in their footsteps, picking up her pace at the heat in their eyes. She gets the feeling that the discussion will have to wait, but she doesn't mind.

She doesn't mind at all.

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Sakura wakes slowly, eyes fluttering as she comes awake in increments. The soft grass tickles her bare arms as she rolls onto her stomach. She rubs at the corners of her eyes, yawning as she takes in her surroundings.

Ashura and Indra are within reach of her, chests rising and falling slowly with the deep breath of sleep. Sakura is entranced with the sight for a long moment, still marveling over the fact that their chests even move. They've been ghosts for so long; she cannot believe the fortune she has.

They are alive; they are here; they are hers.

Sakura sits up, keeping quiet as she begins to pluck some of the nearby flowers. They are on the lands bequeathed her by Konoha, resting after several long weeks of work. Konoha is a flurry of action at the moment: Tenten has been announced as Tsunade's successor, Naruto and Karin have set out toward Uzushio, and Sakura has officially been given the title of ambassador by Konoha. So, the workload has increased exponentially as they prepared for all of these changes.

She weaves the flowers together, braiding the stems with an expert twist of her wrist. She's been doing this since she and Ino became best friends, all of those years ago.

Sakura's eyes slide shut beneath the heat of the sun, basking in the simple pleasure. What could be better than this? She's with her people, everyone is at peace, and her people are actively pursuing their dreams. She is thankful for the fact that she is still living, for the ultimate sacrifices made by Sarutobi-sensei and Inner that allow her to be here with her people.

She weaves a dandelion in with the daisies she already has there. Sakura pulls free a sprig of fennel, chewing on it.

Her gaze returns to Indra and Ashura, even as her fingers continue to make quick work of the plants. They look ethereal in repose, otherworldly, supernatural beings as they used to be. Awe fills Sakura, unable to believe that they even deign to consort with her.

They love her, as fiercely and ardently as she loves them.

She finishes off the crowns with a flourish, deftly getting to her feet. Sakura moves toward the Ōtsutsuki brothers, dropping the crowns on their heads with a giggle.

They both come awake with a start, Ashura snorting in shock as they sit up.

"Wha—" Ashura says, looking up at the crown on his head. He raises a hand to it. "A crown?"

"Did you make these Sakura?" Indra asks, yawning slightly. He lifts it off his head, surveying it. "It's lovely work. If your new position as ambassador does not work out, you could take over the Yamanaka Flower Shop."

Sakura grins, glancing between them. "Well, do you accept them?"

"Of course we do Sakura!" Ashura says immediately.
Sakura continues to watch them with anticipation, frowning when their expressions do not change. She nearly smacks herself as she realizes something. "Flower crowns can have significance among Konoha shinobi. It started with the Senju and kind of carried forward to future generations. Flower crowns can represent intent." She stops, flushing slightly.

"And what intent is that?" Indra asks, eyes sparkling with an intent all his own.

"The intention of marriage," Sakura says, keeping her eyes downcast. "These aren't the final flower crowns; I used what was on hand rather than things signifying my relationships with you. Though these flowers do represent our relationships generally. The daisies represent loyal love, dandelions overcoming hardships, fennel represents strength, and honeysuckles represent bonds of love." Sakura tucks her hair behind her ear nervously. "It's only the first courting gift but—"

Sakura is cut off by the press of Indra's lips against hers. She stills for a moment before pressing closer, kissing him in turn. It is a slow, easy kiss, a reassurance, a dedication to the relationship. Sakura relaxes into the kiss and Indra pulls away slowly. Sakura feels the heat of Ashura's body as he takes a seat behind her, pulling her against his chest and leaning forward to place his chin against her shoulder as he wraps his arms around her.

"You beat us to the punch, love," Ashura murmurs in her ear.

"What do you mean?" Sakura asks, nose wrinkling slightly as the fennel in Ashura's crown tickles her ear.

"We've been preparing your courting gifts for months," Indra says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small scroll. He unseals it and Sakura watches with anticipation as the smoke clears.

Indra proffers a crown of his own to her. It is wrought in fine silver, with hewn and polished dark crystals lining the silver work. Ropes of silver chain of varying lengths connect from one side to the other.

"Will you allow me the honor?" Indra asks. Sakura shifts, letting Indra place the crown upon her head. It is light and fits perfectly. Indra pulls away, regarding her softly. "You're magnificent."

"My turn!" Ashura exclaims, breaking the weighty moment.

He removes a scroll of his own, releasing it to reveal a crown of his own. His silver crown is wrought to look like branches and antlers woven together with three individual peaks. Within each peak is nested a pale green stone the color of Sakura's eyes.

"We made them to interlock with each other," Ashura says, tone softening. "Two crowns become one crown. The three of us in one imperfect, blended relationship. We want this, with you, forever."

"That's exactly what I want," Sakura says, voice trembling as Ashura places the crown atop the other, the grooves clicking and locking into place.

"You're it for us," Indra says. "I look forward to spending the rest of my life with you."

"And what a wonderful, eventful life it'll be," Sakura says, remembering her initial thoughts upon meeting them face to face.

"Haruno Sakura," Ashura begins, voice solemn but eyes dancing, "will you allow us the honor of joining the Haruno clan as your husbands?"
She flings herself at the both of them, tackling them to the soft, sweet grasses below. The glade rings with laughter as Sakura closes her eyes and lets go of all of her doubts and fears. Everything is changing and uncertain; Sakura knows she is caught in the middle of it all, but she isn't worried.

How can she be?

She has Indra and Ashura with her, for every day for the rest of their lives.

Which means, of course, that every day will be a halcyon day.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for joining me in this tale. This story is forever close to my heart and I am ecstatic to share it with you all in full. I've learned so much, grown in countless areas thanks to this fic. This fic has led to one of the deepest and greatest friendships in my life and I am thankful for it every single day. It feels like an accomplishment to present this final chapter to you; this is the longest story I have written to date. I thank you for your patience and kindness across these past three years. I am so grateful for the experience and to you, dear reader, for being a passenger in this journey. Thank you and I hope you enjoyed!

End Notes

I just wanted to try a different style of writing than usual. this is heavily inspired by Stonemedusa’s Indra/Sakura/Ashura oneshot. I thank her for her permission to write this story. so, yeah. I’m not sure if I’m leaving this as an oneshot or if I will expand upon it further. I kind of want to follow Sakura through each of her promotions, but, who knows? I have some ideas so, maybe.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!